

Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter

NOVEL

8



Written by **Reia**
Illus. Haduki Futaba



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Elpis

Alfred

Iris

Louis

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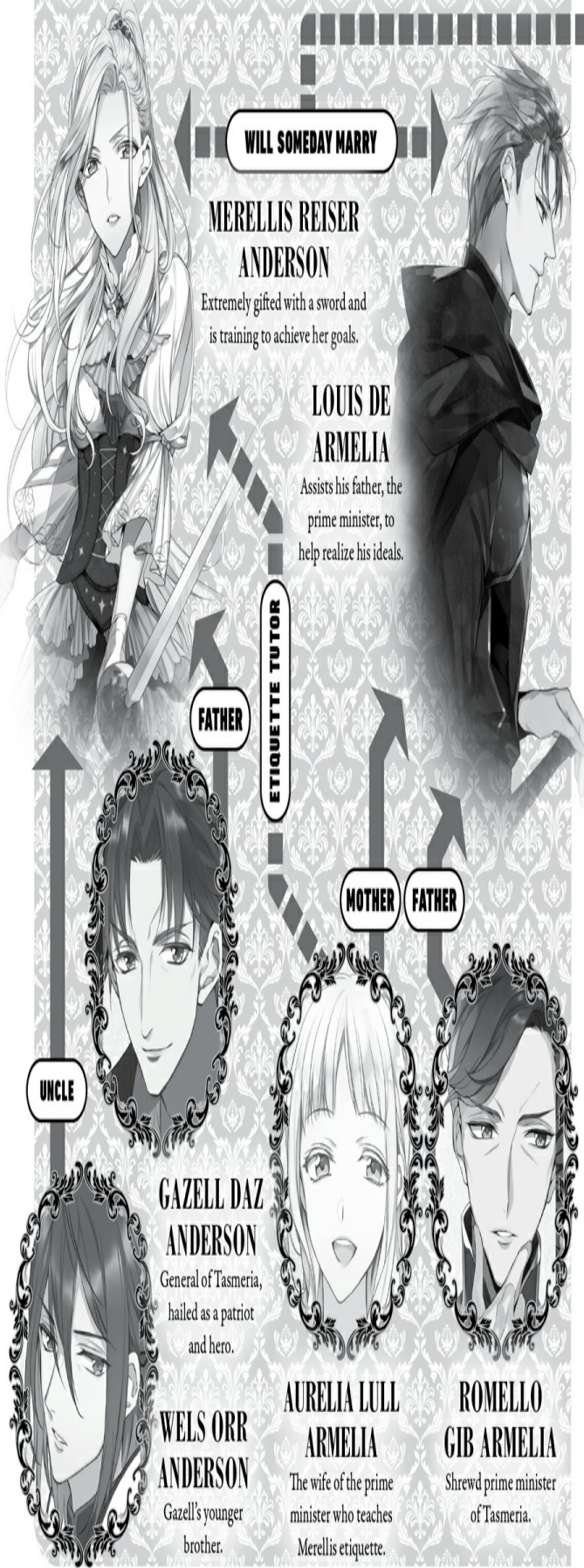
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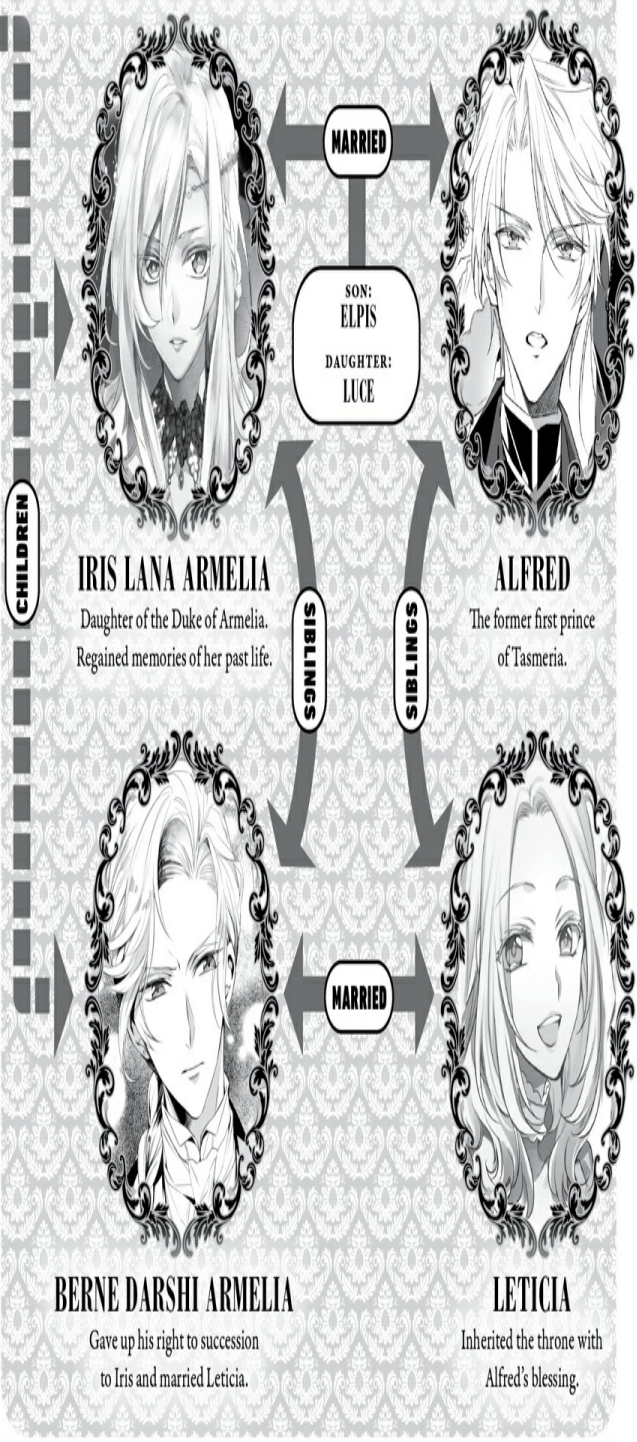
MERELLIS'S SAGA

This installment of the story follows Iris's mother, Merellis, when she was a young girl.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER

This story follows Merellis's daughter, Iris, on her journey as she overcomes her reputation as a villainess and finally achieves happiness.



RIMMEL

A principality controlled by five dukes. There are three factions within the five houses; the hard-liners, who want to invade Tasmeria, the neutral faction, and the moderate faction.

THE FIVE DUKES: GRINDEL • SLIGAR • PHILLING • CROWE • BASKAR

characters

KOSHAKU REIJO NO TASHINAMI Vol.8

KOSHAKU FUJIN NO TASHINAMI

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Chapter 10:

Romello's Battle

THE FOLLOWING EVENTS occurred just before Merellis started school at the academy...

Romello visited the principality of Rimmel with a small number of personal bodyguards in tow. The visit was quite divisive. There were three factions of nobles in Rimmel: the hard-liners, the moderates, and those who were neutral. After the war with Tweil, Tasmeria's national power was on the decline. The hard-liners wanted Rimmel to invade the kingdom in order to expand their territory. The moderates, however, wanted to avoid war at all costs. That left the neutrals faction who naturally didn't want to get involved at all.

The intense battle for power among these factions was a reflection of the battle for authority among five influential noble families in Rimmel. Those included the houses of Duke Philling, Duke Grindel, Duke Sligar, Duke Baskar, and Duke Crowe.

The reason for Romello's visit was to get the support of the moderate and neutral factions, and together, they would plot against the hard-liners. If the hard-liners had their way and launched a war against Tasmeria, the kingdom simply would not hold. The kingdom's coffers were already in the red, thanks to the last war with Tweil. Even if they could pull off a victory, sacrifices would be unavoidable. Since the war with Tweil wasn't so long ago, it would be incredibly damaging to the nation's spirit and the people's confidence in the kingdom's leadership.

If war broke out, it was near certain that Tasmeria would be destroyed from the inside out. And if the war was with the land of Rimmel, Tweil would jump on that opportunity, violate the cease-fire agreement, and jump into the fray.

And so, Romello had gone on an unofficial visit to Rimmel in order to avoid that very scenario.

Once his entourage was finally at the inn, Romello sat down and looked

around at his guards; he could see the fatigue on their faces. He knew his own face must look the same. It was no wonder; Romello was incredibly busy, so they had to make haste on their journey.

“I’m sure you all must be exhausted. It’s thanks to you that I arrived here safely. Unfortunately, from here on is where things will get serious. Please continue to do your jobs to the best of your ability.”

His guards all stood at attention. Yes, they were tired, but they were not defeated. However, Romello knew that if they continued to be on such high alert for an extended period of time, it would impact their mental health. He put a great deal of responsibility on each member of his guard, demanding the utmost flexibility and confidentiality on the journey here.

But, as Romello said, this is where it would start to get serious.

If he got injured in another country, the non-aggression pact he was pursuing would be little more than a pipe dream. In fact, it might even be used as a pretense for war.

“Yes, my lord!”

These bodyguards were elite soldiers, handpicked by Gazell. They were both physically and mentally tough. Not one of them were weak enough to turn their eyes from battle. They all stood at attention, regarding Romello with confident gazes.

“I’m sorry I have to put you through all this,” Romello said with a smile, seeing how prepared they were.

“It’s an honor, my lord.” The one who spoke was Kreuz, Gazell’s vice-commander. The fact that he was part of the group made it clear how selective Gazell had been with this contingent.

“I can see the fire in your eyes. I like it.”

“Thank you, my lord. May I tell you something?”

“What is it?”

“That fire is simply our determination not to lose, not under any circumstances. The kingdom’s future and fates of its citizens depend on this

diplomatic tour. Seeing you bear such a responsibility would make it impossible for any of us to not perform to the best of our abilities.”

“I’m merely the right person for the job, but unfortunately, I cannot protect myself.”

“Well, if you could, then we would all be out of a job.”

“Ha ha ha! Even if I were to grow strong, nothing would change. I would lose when it came to quality. You know, only the best soldiers are allowed into the guard.”

“I see.”

Both of them immediately thought of two people: Gazell and Merellis.

Romello would never utter her name in such a situation, though. Kreuz was not aware that the Mer he knew was Merellis, and Romello was not supposed to know of Mer’s existence either. Neither of them spoke the name of the person they thought of, but the fact that they both thought of that pair meant their presences were fresh on their minds.

“Plus, refusing to lose is part of being ready,” said Romello. “Preparedness can’t be given to you; you have to recognize it and nurture it in your own heart. I greatly admire that determination because it shows how serious you take the responsibility of your job.” Although Romello was speaking as the prime minister, his expression was softer than usual.

“The general says the same thing.”

“Gazell does?”

“Yes. Before the war with Tweil, he came before the soldiers and said, ‘Do you know what being prepared means? It’s a vow you make to yourself. And once you make a vow to yourself, you can’t make excuses. Readiness comes from your own willpower. And those who are prepared are strong. They’re here because of their own will.’”

“I see... I understand that. Being prepared means that you’ve accepted the responsibility of your job.”

“It surprised me, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized civil

officials had a lot in common with military officials,” remarked Kreuz.

“Of course they do. Although we have different statuses, we’re both working to protect the same things,” Romello said firmly.

Kreuz smiled. “I suppose that’s true. And that’s precisely why I would give my life to protect yours. You share the same values. I place my trust in you because you want to protect what we want to protect.”

“It must be the utmost trust, hm? Thank you for the encouragement. Let’s all work as hard to achieve the most desirable outcome we can.”

“Well, we’ll be excusing ourselves now.” Kreuz and the guards stood at attention one last time and then left the room.

Now that Romello was alone, he went over to the window. The scenery he saw there was completely different from that of Tasmeria. Back home, the buildings were all made of gleaming white marble except for the churches, but here the buildings were made of brown brick. They gave off a solemn and imposing atmosphere. He stared at the view for a while, as if to etch it into his brain.

Suddenly, a knock at the door broke the silence. The Armelia family butler, Alf, stepped into the room.

“How is it?” Romello asked.

“There’s no problem, my lord. The inn is safe and secure.”

Romello looked visibly relieved. “I see. I knew I could rely on you.”

“Why, it is my job to provide a comfortable environment for you, sir.” Alf bowed his head obediently.

Romello chuckled. “I suppose checking all the food in the inn to make sure it’s not poisoned *does* provide a comfortable environment.”

Alf didn’t deny that. Instead, he wore a calm smile on his face. Romello relaxed seeing this reaction. “Thanks to you, I can finally rest. I’m grateful, Alf.”

“I am only doing my job, my lord.”

“Well, I admire your dedication to it. Now, I know you must be very tired, but

would you make me a cup of tea?”

“Yes, of course.”

Romello walked away from the window and sat down while Alf brewed the tea.

“I thought you had quite a serious look on your face as you looked out the window. Are you thinking of home?”

“I just wanted to burn the view into my mind, thinking about what the people I’m about to meet are shouldering. I want to learn as much about them as I can before our meeting.”

“Is that right, sir?”

“I’m worried about the kingdom, of course, but I’m sure Louis can take care of things in my stead. I have my other subordinates as well. And Aurelia will have no problem taking care of the household.”

Alf gently handed him a cup of warm tea. Romello picked it up without hesitation and sipped. “Mm, delicious.” Alf smiled even deeper. “Tomorrow I’m visiting Duke Grindel and Duke Philling, was it? Alf?”

Romello’s gaze grew sharp. Alf nodded, understanding what he meant immediately.



He told the prime minister everything he learned about Duke Grindel. The man was one of the five most influential noble families in Rimmel, owning a great deal of fertile lands to the northwest. He was the wealthiest out of the five families, and although his domain's climate was cold, the land itself was rich. He made most of his money from the crops he grew. In addition, the cloth produced in his domain using a special weaving technique had grown popular throughout the country and abroad as well.

The duke's name was Morris Grindel. His wife was Lynette Grindel, and they had one son. The duke's reputation was spotless, and he was a man of integrity. He was known for being dauntless and decisive.

"If his domain is in the northwest, even if an invasion of Tasmeria went well, he'd suffer more casualties and financial setbacks in the battle than the others," Romello remarked.

"Also, Morris Grindel cares deeply about the citizens. I'm sure he'd want to avoid a needless war. At least that's what I've gathered from the information we've gotten about him," Alf said.

"All right... What about his military force, compared to the other dukes?"

"I believe it's proportional to his wealth. The most powerful dukes are Grindel, Sligar, Philling, Crowe, and Baskar. If you look at the numbers only, if the hard-liners and moderates were to go to war with each other, the moderates would win. And if you add together the military strength of all five houses, our kingdom's numbers are a bit larger than Rimmel."

"I see. In that case, are the hard-liners trying to expand their forces?"

"According to Rimmel's laws—well, actually, due to a pact among the five houses—they cannot publicly try to grow their armies. Having said that, it seems that Duke Sligar is doing so anyway, in secret."

"Oh, is that so?"

"But that doesn't mean they're just added prepared soldiers to their numbers. They'll need suitable training, so it will take some time before their new additions are ready to fight. On the other hand, in Duke Grindel's domain, he has many citizens who are able to fight but are not counted among their

military.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The people there are encouraged to learn the traditional martial arts of the area. Now, it’s not a type where they learn to kill—it’s focused on strength and mental training. The men and women there begin to learn it at a very young age.”

That sounded like House Anderson to Romello. Known as the military house of Tasmeria, the citizens there were also encouraged to train themselves in the military arts. The House Anderson guard was known to be the strongest.

“I can see why Duke Sligar would want to amass troops then.”

“Yes. It’s possible that he’s spending a lot of money on military reserves.”

“That might mean he’s even more anxious about funds than the others.”

“Yes, I think that’s quite possible, sir.”

“Have mercenaries been coming and going from Sligar’s duchy regularly?”

“No. The last time they were spotted was probably four or five years ago.”

“Interesting...” Romello pondered this, frowning.

“My lord?” Alf questioned.

“Nothing. Continue, please.” Romello waved his hand, urging him to go on.

Alf continued filling Romello in on the information he had asked for. The next bit was about the third wealthiest duke, Bruno Philling, and his wife, Kellie. Although the marriage was a political match, the couple were close. They had a boy and a girl.

“Do you have any information about Kellie’s family and their connections?”

“She’s the daughter of a count, and her family seems to be close with the Grindels and other hard-liners throughout the country.” Romello nodded, and Alf continued.

For the Phillings, the most famous product in their domain was alcohol fermented from barley. They exported it outside of the country and therefore maintained ties with Tasmeria and Acacia.

The relationship with Tasmeria was simply a business relationship, while their relationship with Acacia was more friendly.

Duke Bruno's hobby was reading. All of his predecessors were avid readers, and there was a big library within his domain.

"He's got a reputation of being a very wise and gentle ruler. There won't be any skeletons in his closet. If that information is true, then he should be against invading Tasmeria, and even if war did break out, he would be loath to sacrifice anyone from his domain. Since his area is large and fertile, he probably won't think it's necessary to expand the country's territory if it means people's lives need to be sacrificed."

Romello closed his eyes as if to sort through the information Alf gave him. His butler stood there silently as he was used to this response.

"You've given me a lot of great information, Alf. Thank you." Romello had studied up on basic knowledge of the dukes before he got here, so he knew most of it already. The reason he had Alf repeat it though was so that he could solidify it in his mind and make sure he hadn't missed out on any new details.

"Of course. Now, regarding the company run by Duke Philling, Staut Corp... We'll continue gathering information from our spies. And we'll continue to keep an eye on House Philling as well."

"I see. Let me know if anything new comes up."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be counting on you. Still, you're certainly as sharp as ever," Romello said with a smirk.

"I'm not sure about that, my lord. No one can win against the tide of time, after all," Alf responded with a wry smile.

"Ha ha ha... I suppose I've gotten a lot older since you first started working for me. That sure brings back a lot of memories... I can still vividly remember the day we first met, with you standing outside of the Armelia manor."

"Yes, I remember that day well too." Alf smiled, staring off fondly into the distance.

“I was even younger than Louis back then, wasn’t I? I suppose time really has flown by. It’s difficult to notice it day to day though.”

“That’s true. But that must mean you live every day to its fullest, no?”

“Ha ha ha. Definitely. I worked and worked and suddenly realized I’m this old! And you’ve certainly done a lot to train the next generation as well.”

“Ah, you mean Berne? Yes, I hope I’ve trained him to serve Lord Louis well.”

“I think he has been. It seems Louis relies on him a great deal already.”

“Ah, do you mean as a spy? I did teach Berne the trade... Are you sure that was for the best?” Alf asked.

Romello let out a sigh. “Growing our personnel is a pressing matter for the kingdom. We needed more people like you, so it couldn’t be avoided. Plus, he seems to be the type of person who would gladly give his all to protect the kingdom. And as the prime minister, having someone like that is extremely valuable.”

“Just like when Master Kreuz said you both are working toward the same goal?”

“Yes, precisely. Are you sure you’re glad you agreed to my request, though? Teaching him your trade. After all, he won’t be returning to our manor. He will be returning to the kingdom instead. Weren’t you worried about his ability to continue fulfilling his duties?”

“I let him in on a few valuable sources of information, plus new ways of collecting additional tidbits. I taught him the basics of how to be a spy, of course. I did not inform my sources about him, though, so there should be no problem.”

“Ah, I see. You’ve been keeping an eye on him, and you think he’s developed his own informant network?”

“It seems that way, yes. That’s why he was able to find out about Duke Baskar’s human trafficking so quickly.”

“Ah, that’s right. It seems Berne is regularly giving Louis information.”

“Well, Lord Louis is the one who took him in, after all. He feels an obligation

to him, and I'm sure that's part of it."

"Part of? So, what's the rest?" Romello gave Alf an amused look.

"If he's prioritizing getting the information to you as quickly as possible, then it's best to tell Lord Louis first. If he went through the proper channels via the palace, the information would have to funnel through many people to reach Lord Louis, and that would take much more time. I think the greatest reason is that he decided that in this instance, time was of the essence. After all, Lord Louis has been taking care of a lot of your work, so it makes sense to share information with him first. That's probably why he decided it wouldn't pose a problem to do so."

In the end, all information vital to the kingdom would still end up going through Romello. Making decisions at that level was part of his official duties as the prime minister. But, bureaucratically speaking, there were many people standing in the way between Romello and Berne; at least two other people would have to look over any paperwork before it would reach Romello's desk. That was an advantage when it was information that needed to be shared with everyone, but it was a different story for urgent matters.

"It would take time for the information to get to me, hm? Well, that's a problem."

"Yes, quite. As a kingdom, if we need someone such as Berne, we need to reevaluate our system. When it comes to things like that, time is of the essence. We can't let a delay in delivery to a decision maker adversely affect the outcome."

"You're right. And if I'm making a decision based on something that's outdated, that could cause confusion. It might not even make any sense."

"Yes, quite."

"In that case, we certainly need to revise our system. Once things calm down, I'll have a talk with Gazell about it," Romello murmured as he looked upward, collecting his thoughts.

Meanwhile, Alf poured some more tea into the man's empty cup. "Well, my lord, if you'll excuse me. I am going to go over the security plans with Master

Kreuz for the journey to Duke Grindel's and Duke Philling's manors tomorrow."

"Of course. Thank you."

The following day, Romello went to visit with Duke Grindel. It wasn't possible from a time standpoint to visit all of their domains, so he had arranged to meet the dukes at their second residences in the capital. Like Tasmeria, Rimmel's capital was the heart of the country. However, since all the domains in Rimmel were so independent from one another, the capital was more like a buffer zone for the five dukes. They all maintained large second estates in the capital, and all of them gathered there at least once a year to discuss the state of the union.

Romello stared out at the scenery on the carriage ride until he finally arrived at Duke Grindel's manor.

"Welcome to Rimmel, Lord Romello!" Duke Grindel greeted Romello himself with a genial smile on his face.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Morris. Thank you so much for inviting me here today." Romello smiled in return as the duke welcomed him inside.

"Why, I can't think of a greater honor than hosting the famous prime minister of the great kingdom of Tasmeria!"

"Famous? Well, I suppose I'd rather have that reputation than a bad one."

"Ha ha ha! You're just being modest. You certainly are the extraordinary and renowned prime minister of Tasmeria!"

"Renowned...? That's quite the exaggeration."

Morris gestured for Romello to sit down, and Alf stood behind him.

"Since we've been exchanging letters for so long, it doesn't feel like this is our first meeting!" Morris said with excitement, easing the tension in the air.

"You're right. I feel the same way." Suddenly, Romello caught sight of a beautiful piece of cloth hung over the window like a curtain. It was light blue with a detailed floral pattern embroidered on it and was simply gorgeous.

"Speaking of famous, isn't that over there made of the famed Grindel fabric?"

“Yes, it is! Each piece is completely handmade. Even if two pieces look alike, they’re actually slightly different.”

“Ah, I see. This fabric is popular in Tasmeria as well, of course, but it’s hard to come by. It really is beautiful.”

“I’m honored to hear that!” Morris had a satisfied smile on his face. “By the way, Lord Romello, what do you think of our country?”

Romello returned his gaze to Morris. “People work, earn a living, eat, and their lives are all interconnected. The people here live just as they do in Tasmeria.”

“I see...” Morris smiled quietly, seemingly content with Romello’s answer.

“And that’s precisely why we should avoid unnecessary fighting. Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t have such lofty ideals. I simply don’t want my beloved citizens to be hurt. And no matter the outcome, war means they will suffer. I simply don’t understand those who would want to cause such a thing.” Morris rose and walked over to the window. It faced north and looked out toward his domain.

“You love your domain and all the people in it, don’t you?”

“Of course. Don’t you feel the same?”

“Yes, I do. But the people you speak of, those who would want war—they exist right now, within your country.”

Morris’s shoulders visibly dropped. “You’re very honest, aren’t you?” he said after a pause.

“It’s because I believe the same things you do.”

Morris chuckled. “True. If you genuinely love your kingdom and wish to avoid war, then we share the same beliefs. But unfortunately, I trust you more than I do people in my own country.”

“I feel the same way. That’s why I’m talking to you so frankly like this.”

“I see... Then allow me to be frank with you as well.”

Romello chuckled. “I’d appreciate that.”

“What are you going to do with these troublesome people in my country?”

“We’re going to protect a certain general from them. That’s because if anything ever happens to him, your troublesome people will make their moves. I have a personal connection with the general, so it’s possible for me to guide him in a certain direction. I feel that’s the safest thing to do in response to those in your country who feel he is a threat. Plus, I believe that if you and I join forces, we can silence those people.”

Of course, when he spoke of a “certain general,” he meant the general and hero of Tasmeria, General Gazell. The man was also well known in Rimmel.

The land of Rimmel feared Gazell, and as long as he was around, the hard-liners wouldn’t try to force Tasmeria into a war. So, in other words, he stood in the way of their plans. The neutral faction had no opinion on going to war with Tasmeria or not, so they rejected the notion of doing away with the general. He was such a big threat, however, that even the moderates wanted him gone.

On the other hand, there were many nobles in his home of Tasmeria who were jealous of him, plotting to ruin his good name, completely oblivious that there were two factions in Rimmel who wanted the same thing. In other words, Romello was saying that he would use all the means at his disposal as prime minister in order to protect Gazell.

“Interesting...”

“What about you? How would you quiet the troublesome people in your country?”

“At this time of year, all the dukes gather here in the capital. We have meetings and talk about how we want to stop them...”

“So will you?” Romello asked, and the duke fell silent. He continued. “I’d like to ask you something. Even if your opinion was different from the other nobles, are you prepared to remain firm in your resolve to not go to war?”

“You ask a very blunt question.”

“Yes. I want to see how dedicated you are to avoiding war. That’s what I plan to talk to you about.” Romello’s eyes gleamed sharply. He gave off a frighteningly serious aura, which made even Duke Grindel, the most powerful

duke in all of Rimmel, break out in a cold sweat.

“Let me ask you the same thing. Are you prepared?”

“Yes, of course.” Romello answered without hesitation.

Morris was shocked. “Well, that was quick.”

“As you know, there was a war after I became the prime minister. And when it broke out, I felt ashamed. A prime minister’s job is to keep order, after all, for the safety of the entire kingdom. To protect the kingdom and its people. And in order to do that, we must seek alliances with other countries in order to maintain a stable government. We must not overlook the seeds of war. We must dig them out before they begin to bud. So, at the time, I cursed my own powerlessness.” A sardonic smile crossed Romello’s face. “I’ll never let another war happen, not on my watch. I’m going to protect my kingdom and our innocent citizens, including our soldiers. Even if it means I get the reputation for being a demon.” *That’s my job as the prime minister of Tasmeria*, he added silently with a soft chuckle.

“Unfortunately, the thing I pride myself most on is the blood that runs through my veins.” Morris spoke in a calm voice. “The blood of my predecessors, all of whom ruled the domain of Grindel and protected its citizens. Did you know that we have a tradition in Grindel to train our people in martial arts?”

“Yes, I know. You use martial arts to train both body and mind, correct?”

“I had a feeling you already knew about it. Yes, that’s right. It’s how the citizens have protected their land on their own. They love their domain, so they’ve protected it along with their families over the years, to this very day. I want to live up to their expectations and put my citizens first, even if that means it’s not in my best interests as a duke of Rimmel.”

The room fell silent for a while, until Romello spoke up again. “I see. I understand very well now just how prepared you are.” His new calm and gentle voice was a sharp contrast to his curt, serious one from earlier. “Let’s discuss this more, then. Alf, the documents?”

“Yes, my lord.” Alf immediately handed a stack of papers to Romello.

“This here is proof that Duke Baskar is engaged in human trafficking.”

“What?!” exclaimed Morris.

“Human trafficking is illegal in your country, is it not? Am I correct?”

“Of course it is! Why in the world would he be doing such a thing?!” Morris looked over the papers, his hands trembling with anger. It was indeed proof beyond a doubt that his fellow duke was involved in selling people into slavery. Morris stared at the paper with bloodshot eyes so intently that one might think he would burn a hole into it. Once he finished reading it, he let out a deep sigh. A sad smile appeared on his face. “I’d expect nothing less of you, Lord Romello. Your capable subordinates have apparently already exposed the state of affairs in my country.” There was a harshness in his voice, proof of just how shaken Morris was over the matter.

“I’m embarrassed to admit it, but there are the same types of despicable people in my kingdom too.”

“Pardon?”

“As you know, to the east of Baskar is Sligar, and to the west is Crowe. If he wants to leave the kingdom, he has to travel through one of those domains. Yet if he does that, he would be easily tracked.”

Morris seemed to realize what Romello was getting at and lifted his head.

“I’m sure you understand...but Duke Baskar has been using my kingdom, which lies to the south, to traffic his slaves. He’s been paying the lord of that domain a handsome sum to keep quiet as he passes through. We were investigating another matter when we noticed a suspicious flow of money. That’s when we discovered what was going on as detailed in those documents.”

Romello wasn’t telling a lie, but he wasn’t exactly telling the truth either. He did, in fact, learn about this when they noticed the suspicious money trail. But the reason he discovered the human trafficking plot was because he had a very capable spy deep in Rimmel. The reason he didn’t tell Morris that was because he decided there was no need for him to reveal his hand to that degree. And, of course, he didn’t want to jeopardize his relationship with the duke.

If he hadn’t used a spy, he probably never would’ve caught wind of this

situation. But now he'd killed two birds with one stone; he received valuable evidence against a duke of Rimmel while rooting out a corrupt noble in his own kingdom.

"You're a very astute man, Lord Romello." Morris's voice was slightly soft.

Romello smiled. "I'm pleased to hear you think that."

Morris smiled as well, and his face now wore a gentle expression. "It seems as though I must muster even more nerve than I expected." In fact, when he said that, there was already noticeable determination in his eyes. "I must be prepared to put an end to Duke Baskar." He smiled and held out his hand. "Thank you, Lord Romello. My heart is at ease. I'm going to put your information to good use, and I'd like to continue building a good relationship with you."

Romello immediately took Morris's hand and shook it. "I feel the same, Lord Morris. If possible, I'd like to build a relationship like ours between our countries as well."

"Oh, that would be interesting! I'm sure you're already thinking about what you'd like to do in the future, hm? I'd love to hear more details about it."

After a firm handshake, the two men began to discuss the non-aggression treaty Romello had put together.

After his meeting with Morris Grindel, Romello went straight to Duke Philling's residence. It didn't take long to get there since he also had another estate in the capital.

"Welcome, Lord Romello." Bruno Philling greeted him with a calm demeanor. A woman stood next to him with a soft smile on her face.

"Thank you for the warm welcome, Lord Bruno."

The two men exchanged a handshake.

"This is my wife, Kellie."

"Oh, I even have the honor of meeting your wife! It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Romello Gib Armelia." He bowed slightly toward the woman.

“The pleasure is all mine. I’m Kellie Philling. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.” Kellie curtsied gracefully. “Please, come in.”

The manor resembled Duke Grindel’s. It had a warm and welcoming atmosphere inside and was decorated with wooden furniture. The couple led Romello into the parlor.

“How was your journey here?” Bruno asked casually as he took his seat.

“Just fine, thank you,” Romello answered.

Kellie sat down and listened to their conversation, a pleasant smile on her face.

“By the way, Lord Romello. Have you ever had the beer from our domain?” Bruno asked.

“Yes, of course. Your beer is known for being quite delicious.”

“I’m honored you think so. Would you like some? I’ve got a special bottle here.”

“I’d love to.”

“Wonderful! Let me show you to another room, Lord Romello.” Bruno rose to his feet.

At the same time, his wife followed suit. “Well, if you’ll excuse me. I hope you enjoy your stay, Lord Romello. I’d love to see you again if you come to our country another time.”

“Thank you, that would be lovely.” Romello answered. He then followed Bruno to another room, which had bookshelves on every wall, crammed full of tomes. Romello could tell that Bruno was an avid reader.

“Sorry for the clutter in here,” Bruno said sheepishly.

“Not at all! You certainly love reading, don’t you?”

“Yes, I’m often teased for being a bookworm, and I’m afraid I can’t deny it!”

They sat across from each other on sofas which were placed in the middle of the room. They both stared at each other silently for a spell, perhaps searching for what to say next or maybe even to size the other up.

The silence stretched on and on, and there didn't seem to be any signs of the beer being brought in.

"I assume you brought me in here because you know what I'm here to discuss?" Romello asked.

They both glanced toward the door. Bruno chuckled awkwardly and stood up straighter in his seat. "Yes, that's right. The beer was just an excuse. I wanted to talk to you in private, although I *do* have special bottles of beer here."

"I see. You know, it wouldn't have been a problem for your wife to be present during the conversation."

Bruno gave him a questioning look.

"I'm joking. I just meant that it's nothing that I wouldn't trust her with." Romello smiled with chagrin.

"I see. Well, let's get back to the main topic."

After that, Romello did the same thing as he had at Duke Grindel's house; he began to present the evidence that Duke Baskar was engaged in human trafficking, working together with a Tasmerian noble.

The only thing different in his visit with Bruno was that he did not ask the duke if he was prepared to move forward. Too many cooks would spoil the broth, after all, and since Morris had already declared he would make a move, there was no reason to fan the flames. However, he still needed to tell Bruno about it so that Morris could make his move easier. But more importantly, Romello liked to meet someone, carefully observe them, and then choose his words carefully.

Every noble did something like this. They would be careful with what they said depending on the person and place. He'd honed these skills as the prime minister as he dealt with so many other nobles, but he owed most of his talents to his keen sense of observation. That was how the two of them had a peaceful conversation from beginning to end. It seemed as though Morris had already spoken to Duke Grindel, so the man understood what Romello was speaking about.

"Well, Lord Bruno. I'm looking forward to the day when you can come visit

Tasmeria.”

“Yes. Once this matter is peacefully resolved, I shall visit. I’m sure you’re a busy man, but I’d love to meet with you and talk some more with you there.”

“Of course. And please, bring Lady Kellie with you. I’m sure my wife would love to meet her.”

“Wonderful.”

They exchanged another handshake, and the meeting concluded.

Bruno watched Romello leave from the window.

“How did it go, darling?” Kellie came up beside him.

“He was very intimidating. No wonder he’s the prime minister of Tasmeria,” he said, continuing to stare out the window.

A half smile crossed his wife’s face. “I’m sure he was. Even when we were just exchanging pleasantries, I was surprised at how knowledgeable he was. It was impressive he could keep up in conversation against such an avid reader like you, but his ability to get information out of both of us so skillfully was quite daunting as well.” She turned her sharp gaze toward Romello as he got farther from the house. There was no sign of the softness she displayed when he had first arrived.

“What’s wrong, Kellie?” Bruno gave her a concerned look, wondering why she had cut off the conversation so abruptly.

“Nothing. I was just wondering why you’re afraid of him.”

“Because I think he figured out that *you* were the one assessing him, not me.”

“Goodness... No wonder.” Kellie didn’t seem surprised by this and simply accepted it.

Bruno, on the other hand, *was* surprised. ““No wonder’? Did you notice that was what was going on?”

“Yes, I wondered that. When we were talking in the salon, he started gradually directing the conversation toward me. At first, I thought he was just

being polite, but at some point, it seemed like the things he was saying were designed to test me. He was so good at choosing his words just right that I had to speculate a bit. I thought it was best for me to excuse myself quickly before I dug my own grave.”

“I see. That makes sense. But then why did you acknowledge him?”

“First of all, he went to see Duke Grindel before us. That must mean he discussed the same things with him as he did with you. Lord Morris is a very good judge of character, even if he sometimes has trouble picking up on the subtleties of people’s feelings. If the prime minister tried to use some pretense to advance the conversation, Lord Morris would’ve jumped on it immediately. I know he’d see right through a lie. Anyway, when the prime minister arrived here, he was completely calm and composed. He seemed very confident the whole time we spoke in the salon. I think that’s because he believed that his meeting with you would go smoothly. He had no reason to be aggressive with you. If Duke Grindel is going to do something with that information, then he probably thought all he had to do was just clue you in, and time would do the rest.”

“Is that so? Anything else?”

“As I said before, he’s extremely knowledgeable and observant.”

“I see...”

“I’m sorry, darling. Since he realized what I was doing, I should have just stayed in the room.” Her expression clouded over.

Bruno smiled tenderly at her. “It’s not your fault. You weren’t sure at the time. You did the best you could. There’s no need to be upset. I had no idea that’s what was going on, so I have no right to blame you.”

“Darling...”

“This just makes me even more certain that I need you at my side. After all, I’m nothing but a bookworm. I’m not suited for diplomatic negotiations. I’m only able to stand at the head of House Philling because I have you. Thank you so much.”

Bruno was the head of House Philling, but he performed all of his duties along

with his wife. His main hobby was reading, and since he read everything he could get his hands on, he was incredibly knowledgeable. On the other hand, he saw interacting with others as a chore and tended to avoid it. Perhaps that was why he never had much interest in social affairs and wasn't very good at noticing subtle changes in people's moods. That made him ill-suited for diplomacy.

However, Kellie was incredibly observant and had filled her head with so much knowledge that even Bruno had to recognize her intelligence. Because of that, he handed over most of the diplomatic duties to her. When there was a diplomatic discussion to be had, she would sit and observe the other party, as she had done with Romello at first, and then she would meet with Bruno later to share her impressions. That was how House Philling governed.

"I respect you so much, darling. Please don't speak badly of yourself."

"No, it's not that. I was just reflecting once again upon how lucky I am to have such a rare woman like you by my side. By the way, Kellie...if we do end up going to Tasmeria, you'll come with me, won't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Wonderful. Now, how about I share with you everything Lord Romello told me?" They headed toward the parlor where they had first met with Romello to settle in for a long conversation.

Romello had successfully met with Morris Grindel and Bruno Philling, and the moment he got back to his room, he flung himself onto his chair in exhaustion.

"Welcome back, Lord Romello." Alf was already there, waiting with a hot cup of tea ready for him.

Romello thanked him and slowly took a sip. "Ahh... That hits the spot," he murmured, then set his cup on the table and looked up.

"You should probably try to get plenty of rest tonight. You have a long day tomorrow," Alf said.

"You're right. I think I'll do just that," Romello answered quickly, but he didn't

move a muscle. “But first... Alf, we need to discuss my plans for tomorrow, visiting Duke Crowe and Duke Baskar’s manors.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The duchy of Crowe in the southwest part of Rimmel, nestled between Tweil and Tasmeria. The duke’s name was Chester Crowe. His wife had died young, so Chester was incredibly devoted to his two daughters. He considered them as living mementos of his beloved wife.

Because of the location of his domain, he often caught wind of Tweil’s military campaigns, and as such, he was the duke who most feared Gazell.

“What is his relationship with the hard-liners and the moderates?”

“Both sides are eager to use any means at their disposal to get him over to their side. The most commonly used tactic is marriage proposals for his daughters.”

“Ah, his daughters aren’t engaged yet? If he dotes on them as much as you say he does, then he wouldn’t marry them off to just anybody.”

“Correct. I’m sure he’ll eventually marry them off to the best match within one of the factions, but at least one of his daughters will be the loser in the battle for power.”

“True. I’m sure an ordinary noble would resort to such means, though. That just goes to show how much he loves his daughters.”

“I think so too.”

“Hm, so Duke Crowe values family first... What is the state of affairs in his domain?”

“I haven’t heard any specific problems as of yet.”

“I see. And what do you think of Chester, from what you know of his work?”

“This is just my personal opinion from reading the documents, but I think he may be a very unerring person. That is to say, he upholds the tenants his forefathers created and wants to protect them.”

“Hm, so you got that impression too, eh?” Romello tipped his head slightly to

look at Alf. “There are some people who would mock men like him, but not me. In fact, I think it’s inspiring. In government, you come up with new policies and implement them. And when you devise these policies, you have to make sure they’re realistic, that there’s not something you’ve overlooked, and you look toward the future. One might think that once you devise a policy, all you need to do then is to enact it, but it’s not always that simple. Sometimes things don’t go according to plan. And other times, you’re just expected to play it by ear, and you’ll have to re-think your policies occasionally. That’s especially so if someone else is the one to actually put your policies into action. You worry that they might not have picked up on all the details. But other times, you’re left amazed at how well they pulled it off.”

“Yes... That is most definitely true.”

“I had so many tough challenges when I first took over the job from my father, but looking back on it now, they all seem like good memories.”

Alf smiled at that.

Romello continued. “You know who else is very impressive, though? Duke Philling’s wife.”

“Kellie Philling, my lord?”

“Yes.” Romello chuckled.

“And what makes you say that? Would you share your impressions of her with me?” It was unusual for Alf to not immediately know what Romello meant, and he looked at him with a searching gaze.

“Well, Bruno certainly is the ultimate decision maker, but I think it’s his wife who does most of his duties.”

“Surely not...!”

“Now, I have no definitive proof of this, but I’m almost positive my hunch is correct,” Romello said with a smile.

“Why do you say that? And why do you look so happy about it?”

“You can just tell some things when you have a conversation with someone. That woman is very used to diplomatic discussions. I think the reason she

excused herself so early from the meeting was because she sensed I was on to her. And happy...? I think I'm more amused than happy."

"Amused, my lord?"

"Yes. She's very skilled at conversation. If I had let my guard down, she could've easily gotten me to reveal my hand. It's been a long time since I enjoyed myself so much in a conversation. Also, Bruno himself is very knowledgeable. They make a wonderful team."

"They're not your allies...but perhaps that's why you're so excited? A formidable enemy has shown themselves. You certainly like to be challenged, don't you, my lord?"

Romello paused for a moment. "I suppose I do," He had a contemplative, faraway look in his eyes as he considered it. "But I love peace more than anything. After all, I came all the way here to promote it. At the same time, though, I want to challenge myself and see how much I'm capable of. That's why I went this far. I'm excited to find such strong people in the same line of work as me."

"I see..." Alf murmured with a smile.

"Why do you look so convinced?"

"Two reasons. One, you have selflessly governed the kingdom; I've witnessed this with my own eyes. Honestly, sometimes I wonder how you can work so hard, but I know it is because you aren't a selfish person. You never put yourself first. So, honestly, I feel relieved to know that you want to challenge yourself."

"Ah, I see."

"And the other reason—and I could say the same thing about General Gazell—is that you both have a dauntless nature. Instead of swearing off danger, it seems to excite the both of you. I believe that to be why you are so capable of making measured decisions."

"Enough analyzing me. Let's get back to the topic at hand. I have to meet with Duke Baskar next."

"Pardon me, my lord." Alf's smile deepened, and he bowed deeply. A serious

expression then crept over his face.

Duke Dennis Baskar. His domain was in the southern part of Rimmel, sitting between Duke Sligar's and Duke Crowe's. He divorced his wife more than a decade prior, and they shared one son together.

"As I told you before, the duke's internal affairs are in dire straits. He was taken in by a moneylending merchant and got involved in the slave trade. At first it was just happening within his own domain, but now it's spread all over the country. I'm sure it hasn't been investigated since he's under the protection of the other dukes, and he probably used that to his advantage. Once Duke Sligar uncovered the plot, the other hard-liners found out. My proof of this is that Duke Sligar isn't the only one supplying goods."

"But don't you think it's strange that Duke Grindel and Duke Philling haven't noticed citizens mysteriously disappearing from their own domains? After meeting with them today, I have a hard time believing they'd be oblivious to something like that."

"I suppose that would be due to how skillful Duke Baskar's merchant in question is. As long as those who went missing don't have family who would raise an uproar, word wouldn't necessarily reach the dukes."

"I see... I suppose that's possible."

"Indeed. Since I already knew about the slave trading, I was able to find out that much. I would imagine investigating would be quite difficult if one didn't have some information already at hand."

"Hm, if the case is as you say, then he must really have someone good behind the operation. Any other clues?"

"The identity of the merchant has been hidden very cleverly. It's possible they are connected to Duke Sligar somehow, behind the scenes."

Romello laughed out loud. "Ha ha ha! So you mean to say the one pulling the strings behind the curtain this time was probably Duke Sligar! Well, no wonder he 'uncovered' Duke Baskar's actions! That also means it's possible that Duke Sligar somehow caused Duke Baskar's dire financial straits himself."

"I expected you would say that, so I am looking into the possibility."

“Hrm... And why do you think this person has a connection to Duke Sligar?”

“We were able to find out the merchant’s identity. His real name is Dirk. He was born in the capital, and his father was also a merchant. The father died when Dirk was very young and left him in debt. After that, he went from place to place and ended up working as a lackey for an unsavory organization. He rose in the ranks there and somewhere along the line made a deal with Duke Sligar. However, he was betrayed by a trusted confidant in the organization and fell from grace. As a result, he changed his name and now goes by Nort. He reportedly runs a business that makes and distributes illegal medicines in the capital. His operations have been expanding over the past several years. From his past behavior, we can surmise that Duke Sligar also has a hand in this business, but I am looking into that as well... Unfortunately, it has taken more time than I had expected to get more information. I’m terribly sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. You certainly did your research. Do you know anything about Duke Baskar’s financial affairs?”

“He was never that wealthy to begin with, but his financial situation completely went on the decline due to his ex-wife and son’s wasteful habits. We didn’t see anything suspicious in our previous investigation, so we paused it. Now, we’ve reopened it, trying to see just what was Duke Sligar’s handiwork. So far, we have not found any connection between Duke Baskar’s ex-wife or her family and Duke Sligar, so we’re looking into how they could have been related at the time.”

“I see. Let me know as soon as you find out anything else. Do you think they were plotting an invasion of Tasmeria even back then? Or was it simply part of an internal power struggle within Rimmel at the time?”

“Judging by the time period in which he started working, I’d imagine it was the latter.”

“Hmm... I see. Well, I suppose even the invasion plot is part of the power struggle. It was a way for them to see who was on their side, and if they could just figure out a *lawful* way to invade us...” Romello trailed off, which was unusual for him.

“What is it, my lord?”

“Ahh, just cursing my own powerlessness.” Suddenly all the expression left Romello’s face, wiping away all emotion and leaving only a harsh coldness. Even his eyes had a cold, piercing glint to them. “You still have one of our men hidden in Count Talbot’s domain, don’t you? The one connected to Baskar.”

“Y-yes.” Alf seemed a bit bewildered at Romello’s reaction but still answered him immediately.

“In that case, I’m going to give the money we were planning on seizing from Count Talbot as part of his punishment to you. Have your spy rewrite his ledger to make an entry at fair market price called ‘Deposit from Duke Baskar.’ I’ll write a letter instructing Louis to cancel the money seizure for that reason. Tell Count Talbot to return that same sum of money to Duke Baskar.”

“All right. When should I do this?”

“Now. It might even be too late. Don’t worry about staying here. Just go get it done.”

“Very well, my lord. But before I go, may I ask why?”

“I have a feeling Duke Sligar came up with the idea to invade Tasmeria as part of the power struggle. If he could find a legitimate reason, then he’d call it ‘justice.’ And if that happened, he would gain more power and influence within this country. At the same time, the more that weaker Dukes like Grindel and Philling oppose him, the worse their positions would be. They’d be suspected to have connections to our kingdom. He predicted that.”

“And for the legitimate reason?”

“He hatched a plot to show that the kingdom of Tasmeria and Duke Baskar were conspiring to kidnap citizens of Rimmel and sell them as slaves. In other words, Duke Baskar was nothing more than a pawn from the very beginning.”

“I see. So that’s why we need to move before Duke Sligar can get his ducks in a row.”

“That’s right. We’ll be a bona fide third party. We approved their entry into the country completely unaware of the situation. That explanation won’t work

if Talbot keeps the money. In order to feign ignorance—which is true, by the way, he didn't know what was going on—it's essential that Talbot returns it. I'm sure if Duke Baskar is indeed still in dire financial straits, he'll accept it. Now listen; he *must* accept the money within five days. It'll take two days to reach Count Talbot's manor from here, four total to travel back. So it is possible for Duke Baskar to accept the money within five days."

"Yes. If I travel through the night without sleeping, I think I can make it there in a day and a half. Since Count Talbot is currently under house arrest and the future count is inexperienced, I think things will proceed smoothly once I use your name. ...May I have your permission to act upon my own discretion?" There was a suspicious glint in Alf's eyes.

Romello smiled slightly in response. "Yes, that's fine. I'm sure you know how to best use fear. You can use it as a collar to put on the new Count Talbot so nothing of this sort ever happens again. By the way, I'll write the letter to Louis, so please have your spy deliver it."

"Very well. But, my lord—why must it be within five days?"

"I'd like the plot laid before I finish meeting the rest of the dukes in Rimmel, and especially before I meet with Duke Sligar in particular. If I were to take my time and go back to Tasmeria first, that would make it look like I was conspiring with Grindel and Philling, so that's why I *must* visit with Duke Sligar and the others during this visit. It would be a bad move to see them before the money has been returned, though, so I'll say I'm not feeling well tomorrow. I'll call off my meetings with Duke Crowe and Duke Baskar to buy me some time. If I'm ill, no one will think twice if I rest here for about a week."

"Back home, if you were feeling ill, you would have your subordinates do the meetings for you. We should tell Lord Louis about your plans and requests. Then I can schedule a new meeting with Duke Sligar."

"All right."

After this meeting, everyone was informed that Romello collapsed from exhaustion due to the long journey and would be resting at the inn for several days. While he waited for Alf to return, he met with no one from Rimmel. Kreuz and the rest of the guards were concerned when they saw how deep in thought

he was as he sat in his chair, but they didn't dare interrupt him. There was a tense mood about the prime minister.

Meanwhile, a strange visitor arrived at the inn, claiming they had a letter for someone lodging there. When the person working at the front desk checked the guestbook, they told the visitor there was no such person staying there.

"Nonsense! They're here!" the visitor insisted.

The employee had a bad feeling about this visitor and suspected they were up to no good. A guard standing by the entrance notified Kreuz about the situation.

"I'm terribly sorry, but we're the only ones staying here. Pardon my rudeness, but are you sure you have the right inn?" Kreuz asked. The visitor gave him a suspicious look. "This is the Faboma Inn. Are you sure you haven't confused it with the Farima Inn?" he continued.

The visitor pondered this for a moment and then nodded. "Perhaps. Sorry for all the commotion. Are you some kind of adventurers?"

"Something like that."

"I see. I thought you looked pretty muscular. Thanks for your help." The visitor casually patted Kreuz on the chest and then left.

The owner of the inn apologized to Kreuz.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I almost forgot the name of the inn too."

"It happens a lot. Two generations ago, a pair of brothers both started inns, and the names were similar. It's so confusing that I've been thinking about changing it, but I've gotten so attached to the Faboma name I just can't do it."

"Ha ha. I suppose it would be hard to change the name if you like it. Well, if you'll excuse me." The moment Kreuz left the lobby, the easy smile vanished from his face. In truth, before Alf left, the man had told Kreuz that a visitor like that might show up, and he told him how to deal with the visitor too. Kreuz had done everything as Alf had told him, and any problems had been avoided.

The issue was now he had to interrupt Romello despite his frightening air in the room and tell him what happened. He couldn't exactly run away from it, so he decided to just go ahead and do it.

“Excuse me, Lord Romello.”

“What is it? Did someone come?” Romello frowned, not making eye contact with him.

“Y-yes, just as Alf said.”

“I see. Can you give me the item he gave you?”

Alf had planned for someone to come because the visitor was his spy—the one working incognito in Rimmel. He couldn’t deliver his information out in the open, so Alf had told both him and Kreuz his plan to deliver it secretly.

The spy would arrive at the inn, pretending to be looking for a guest who would not be there. Kreuz would deliver a set line that Alf had told him beforehand to confirm the spy’s identity. Everything Kreuz had said to the visitor had been scripted by Alf. In other words, the entire conversation they had was a code.

And when the spy confirmed Kreuz had said the correct response, he would hand over a piece of paper. This exchange had happened when he “casually” patted Kreuz on the chest, using that opportunity to slip him the note.

Romello read the note’s contents. It regarded Duke Sligar, who he was slated to meet with soon. Duke Curtis Sligar’s domain lay in the eastern part of Rimmel and bordered Tasmeria to the south. He was over sixty years old, making him the oldest of the five dukes. He had two sons, with his eldest son, Cordis, having a gentle disposition who enjoyed cultivating medicinal herbs as a hobby. He had strong relationships with merchants who sold the herbs.

His second son, Miles Sligar, was a very willful man who craved the spotlight. The family, including their father, was torn between which young man deserved to be the heir.

The reasons were three-fold. First, they were born only two years apart. Second, the eldest had a weaker constitution, while the second son was healthy and strong. And thirdly, Curtis liked his second son’s personality and doted on him especially.

It was clear to see why he still had not named an heir.

“Lord Romello?” Kreuz said at last, having waited until the man had finished reading.

“Yes?”

“Was there something good written there?” Romello glanced over at Kreuz for a moment. “I just mean...you’ve been smiling as you read it.”

Romello froze for a moment. *Smiling? At a time like this?* he wondered to himself.

“No, unfortunately there’s nothing good in this report,” he said, “although it will aid me going forward.”

“I see...” Kreuz responded vaguely, perhaps because he didn’t understand what Romello meant. After thinking about it for a moment, he smiled. “So what you mean to say is, although you may not have received a full meal, you *did* receive top-quality ingredients to make one. But even when you have the ingredients, you need a skilled cook to prepare it, or else it won’t be as delicious as it could. And the opposite goes as well. I’m sure since you’re the one preparing it, it will definitely be delicious. Am I correct, my lord?”

“You certainly have a way of flattering people, Kreuz.”

“Thank you for the compliment.” Kreuz said in a joking tone of voice.

Romello chuckled back.

Two days later—in other words, five days after Romello had started staying at the inn—Alf returned. He had his usual soft smile on his face with no trace of fatigue.

“What happened?”

“He will return the money to Duke Baskar tomorrow.”

“Wonderful! I’m glad you made it happen under such tough circumstances, and in such a short time too.”

“Yes, I’m grateful he agreed to it. It seems Duke Baskar is running quite low on funds. He immediately agreed to a meeting with Count Talbot. An employee will deliver a letter from Talbot along with the money, so it will be returned on the morrow. Of course, I checked the contents of the letter myself. It said, ‘Enclosed

is the money paid to us by Duke Baskar from Nort's company, which acted as a security deposit, proof of identity, and for safe passage of the people who passed through my domain. Since these people passed through without incident, I thought it appropriate to return the money. However, since we never received a request for return of the funds, we apologize for the delay but have enclosed the money you entrusted with us here in full."

It certainly wasn't common, but sometimes powerful merchant families or nobles would pay a deposit—a traveler's tax, if you will—when entering another domain. It served as a guarantee that the person was who they said they were and as an insurance policy in case they were involved in some kind of trouble. And if there were no such problems, the money would be returned to them upon them leaving the domain.

That system was how Romello had decided to explain the money that Count Talbot would receive.

"I think that's fine."

"Thank you. Now, regarding your meeting with Duke Sligar, I've rescheduled it for tomorrow. You'll be seeing Duke Crowe before him as his schedule lined up perfectly."

"All right. You did well, Alf."

"Think nothing of it, my lord. That's all the information I have for you today, so if you'll excuse me."

"Of course. Get some good sleep tonight."

And so the next morning, Romello went to see Duke Crowe. Chester Crowe had a tense look on his face; it was clear he was nervous to be meeting Romello for the first time. But once Romello brought up the topic of a mutual non-aggression pact, that stress melted away, and Crowe agreed to come to Tasmeria to meet with him to speak further about it at a later date.

Now that that was settled, Romello took a bit of a rest and then headed toward Duke Sligar's residence. It didn't take long to get there at all.

"How was it?" Alf asked, walking behind Romello.

“It was fine. Let’s go,” Romello chuckled slightly and then started walking again.

Alf didn’t say anything further and continued following him.

“Welcome, Lord Romello!” An elderly man dressed in butler’s clothing greeted Romello and his companions at the door with a welcoming smile and a bow. “The master is waiting. Please, follow me.”

Romello and Alf instinctively knew that this was a person with whom they should not let down their guards. The butler didn’t do anything in particular that was suspicious—in fact, he seemed like a rather friendly person. But when faced with that impeccable smile, both of them became cautious, sensing deep down that the butler was much like Alf.

The elderly butler padded down the red-carpeted hallway. Romello, Alf, and Kreuz and the rest of the guards followed behind them. “Please wait here. Your guards can wait in the next room.”

Romello sat down on the sofa while Alf stood waiting behind him. Soon afterward, the butler knocked on the door and appeared again, this time with the lord of the manor in tow.

Romello rose to his feet.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Curtis Sligar. I’d like to welcome you after such a long journey. Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, I’m so sorry about that,” said Romello. “I’m not used to traveling such long distances, and I think the fatigue just got to me. I’m much better today. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me.”

Curtis sat down on the opposite couch, and Romello took his seat again.

“Now, Lord Romello. I assume you’re very busy, so what brings you all this way?” Curtis’s voice already had a sarcastic tone to it.

Romello heaved an inward sigh, despite the smile he wore on his face. “Isn’t it the natural thing for a prime minister to want to do? To forge greater ties between nations?”

“Is it now?” Curtis’s mouth turned slightly upward, but his eyes were not

smiling at all. “You’re quite the hard worker. My country and yours have never had much in the way of diplomatic relations. Oh, actually—I suppose a portion of my country and a portion of yours *did* have ties, now that I think about it.”

Romello smiled. *I knew he’d allude to that*, he thought. “Yes, so I’ve heard that my Count Talbot and your Duke Baskar are friends. In fact, just before I left the inn, a messenger from Count Talbot came and informed me that he would be going to see Duke Baskar today. I’m sure their meeting is already over though.”

Curtis’s expression immediately changed. “Is that right? Well, I hope that will form a strong bridge between our two countries.” He recovered quickly, a sardonic smile returning to his lips.

“Yes, quite. Personally, I’d love to forge even deeper ties.”

“That’s a wonderful thing. Do you have any specific plans?”

“Well, discussions between us are absolutely essential to those agreements, as well as understanding that they’re the foundation of diplomacy. Honestly, I’m not sure if we should have cross-national ties or ties with individual domains. That’s where I’d like to start, anyway.”

“I see, I see... And when do you plan on starting these discussions?”

“I’d like to say anytime, but since I came here in a rush so I could see everyone at once, I’m embarrassed to admit that I didn’t bring the necessary documents. Now, this is just a suggestion, but I’d like to invite you all to my kingdom for further talks.”

Curtis frowned slightly at that.

Romello pretended not to notice and continued. “It’s the off-season for high society now, and in my kingdom, we’re having many events celebrating the founding of our nation. It would be a wonderful opportunity for you to see our land, but most of all, it would be easy to have a meeting with all five of you and our highest-ranking nobles. I’ve already talked to the other dukes, and they’ve agreed. Now, it’s up to you.”

“Oh? Baskar and Crowe agreed?”

“I understand why you brought up just those two names, but when I said they *all* agreed, I meant all four of them.”

Even though he hadn't met with Baskar directly, he'd given Talbot an invitation to pass on to him. If he had sent it through the mail, the duke might not respond. However, once given an invitation in person, he would have to. Romello had received word that Baskar easily agreed to the meeting, perhaps because it was *after* his money had been returned. Both Talbot's servant and Alf's spy had given him the same account, so he knew it was accurate.

Curtis's cheek twitched at Romello's response.

“Do you perhaps have a problem with those two houses being invited...?” Romello asked, intentionally painting a worried expression on his face. Once again, Curtis's cheek twitched at Romello's reaction. He laughed inwardly, thinking to himself *Now, you shouldn't let your emotions show so easily on your face!* In fact, a moment like this was when it was absolutely essential to hide your true feelings and wear a smile.

“No... It's just they have had negative views on forging diplomatic relations with other countries. I'm surprised they agreed to a meeting.”

“Duke Baskar, not a fan of diplomacy? Perhaps under normal circumstances, yes. But our kingdom is very grateful to Duke Baskar's merchant. Because thanks to him, Count Talbot was able to forge a relationship with him and that's why the Duke agreed to the meeting.”

Curtis's face twisted.

“I digress. Now, if you come all the way to Tasmeria, the most desirable outcome would be if we can arrive at a mutual agreement. My kingdom can prepare a foundation for that.”

Curtis snorted with laughter, as if to say, “*Don't be ridiculous!*”

Grindel and Philling were moderates, and even if they had agreed to go to Tasmeria, there was no way Baskar and Crowe would go if he put a stop to it. That was why he laughed. But then he remembered something Romello said previously and froze.

“*Should we have cross-national ties or ties with individual domains?*”

At first, Curtis thought he meant the man didn't know which would be most beneficial to Tasmeria, but now he realized there was a different meaning. If Tasmeria entered a treaty with Rimmel, then all five dukes must agree to it. But if they just forged treaties with individual domains, that would be an entirely different story.

Rimmel had been formed when five countries joined together as one principality. And as such, the rulers of those five domains were very powerful. That was why it was certainly possible for each of them to engage in their own treaties with Tasmeria. In other words, Romello was telling him, *"Whether the treaty is formed with the principality, or the dukes, is all up to Rimmel. And no matter what, once the dukes come to Tasmeria, that treaty will be enacted... even if some dukes elect not to come."*

It would be a different story if the other dukes were against it, but now that *four* of them had agreed, Curtis knew it would be very difficult to stop the treaty by himself. And for the same reason, it would be difficult for him to stop them from going to Tasmeria at all. He had no idea how Romello had gotten them all to agree to it, but he must've made them somehow believe that it would benefit them to make the trip to the other kingdom.

Curtis did not have the power to stop the principality from entering a treaty, nor to stop his fellow dukes. And even if he tried to force them to halt, Grindel and Philling would jump on that immediately and try to take advantage of it.

"Is there a seat for me at the table?" Curtis asked after much thought. It pained him to do so, but he put a smile on his face.

"Yes, of course. I'd like everyone to be there, if possible."

"I see. Well, then. I'll certainly consider it."

"Well, well. Thank you! I'm looking forward to seeing you all there." Romello bade Curtis goodbye and left the room. He followed the elderly butler through the hallway.

"Oh...!"

On his way out, Romello and his party ran into a slender man.

"Welcome home, Lord Cordis. This is the prime minister of Tasmeria, Romello

Gib Armelia. He was just meeting with your father. Lord Romello, this is Lord Curtis's eldest son, Lord Cordis."

"Romello Gib Armelia...? The famous prime minister of Tasmeria!"

"It's an honor to meet you, Lord Cordis. Yes, I am Romello Gib Armelia, although I'm not sure about the famous part. However, I've heard that you're very knowledgeable about medicinal herbs—is that true?"

Cordis laughed. "I'd expect nothing less of you, Lord Romello. Would you happen to have some time to spare?"

"Yes, of course."

"Please, come this way." Cordis led him in the opposite direction of the parlor where he had met with Curtis. On the way there, they passed through a room decorated with portraits that Romello guessed were the previous dukes of Sligar. The frames were elaborate and gilded, and Romello and Alf stared at them with deep interest. Alf appeared casual, but he was trying very intently to commit the details of these paintings to memory. The man always had his eyes and ears peeled in order to note things that may be important later, so of course he couldn't ignore such a room.

After they walked through it, Cordis led them out to the courtyard. Not only were the grounds designed to entertain guests, but useful plants were growing here and there throughout the garden.

"It might not be very interesting to our visitors, but I am very proud of this garden."

"Ah... You tend to this garden yourself, Lord Cordis? That's very impressive." Romello looked around with great interest. Suddenly his gaze stopped on a certain plant that he recognized. It was a type of flower that, although it was very beautiful, possessed a powerful poison that could kill a person in an instant. The more that he looked around, the more he realized that many of the plants here *resembled* common flowers or plants, and to the untrained eye, might appear to be merely medicinal herbs. However, they were in fact frighteningly fearful poisonous plants.

"You certainly do love medicinal herbs, don't you? I can tell you tend to this

garden very carefully. But...why have you brought me here?" Romello turned his gaze back over to Cordis.

"Oh, just to boast. My family has no interest in it...although I do someday hope that they'll come around and see just how wonderful it is."

"Do you mean the garden...or you?"

"That's a good question. Both, I suppose." Cordis smiled faintly.

His expression sent chills up Romello's spine. "I see. Well, well. Why would you share such a thing with a stranger like me?"

"Hm, I wonder? Because you seem interesting, perhaps? I can tell that you're an intelligent man, and it's exciting to talk with someone like you," Cordis said in a gentle tone of voice.

Meanwhile, Alf realized that the information his spy had supplied to him had been correct, indeed. Cordis was a gentle man, yes, but through their conversation, Alf could tell that wasn't all he was. The young man wasn't just handsome and kind.

"Am I interesting? Perhaps that's because you're even more intrepid than your father. I hope that one day he realizes how useful your medicinal herbs are. Well, Lord Cordis, I must be getting to my next appointment. If you'll excuse me."

"Yes, of course. Forgive me for keeping you. I'm looking forward to when I might see you again." Cordis turned to the elderly butler. "Please see Lord Romello and his party out, if you would."

"Hm? Who are these people?" A man was coming into the manor just as they were leaving. Unlike Cordis, he was strong and muscular, and wore a sword at his hip.

"They are your father's guests," remarked the butler. "This is Romello Gib Armelia. Lord Romello, this is the master's second son, Lord Miles Sligar."

"Armelia... Where have I heard that name before...?"

The butler frowned. It was incredibly rude for the master's son to basically say, *"I don't know who you are,"* in front of Romello, as he was a guest in their

house. Not only that, but he was the prime minister of a neighboring kingdom.

Miles had just revealed that he was woefully uneducated. If he had said such a thing in private, the butler would have surely scolded him.

“That’s...”

“It’s fine. Even if you tell me, I’m sure I’m not interested, and I won’t remember it either. Well, whoever you are—if you’ll excuse me.” Miles interrupted the butler and walked away.

“Please forgive his rudeness, Lord Romello,” the butler apologized.

“I’m not bothered. Thank you for showing us out.” He truly didn’t mind. In fact, he was grateful to know firsthand that the intel he’d received about the second son was true.

They left the Sligar manor and returned to the inn.

“You did wonderfully,” Alf said to Romello after they went back to his room to rest. Alf set a cup of tea in front of the prime minister.

“Thank you. I couldn’t have done it without all of your help.”

“Not at all. Well, I must make the preparations for the journey home, so I’ll go ahead and get started.”

“Yes...” Romello had a thoughtful look on his face and stared absently into space.

“Is...something the matter?” From time to time, Alf would glance over at Romello, and he noticed the man’s mind was elsewhere.

“Hm? Ah, just thinking about Duke Sligar’s eldest son.”

“Cordis Sligar?” Alf asked. Romello nodded. “I see. I’ll investigate him more, but would you tell me why?”

“Aren’t you curious? He showed us that garden with all those poisonous plants and then said he wanted his family to know how wonderful they were. It’s obvious what he wants to do. It was like he was testing me to see if I noticed the poison...almost as if he were showing them off. It was evil.”

“Yes. It’s clear that the duke much prefers the second son as well.”

“So it is. Alf, send out the orders. Once we get back, tell Louis to start preparing for the meeting with the dukes of Rimmel. I’d like you to help him too.”

“Yes, my lord. I’ll do so right away after we finish preparing for the journey back.”

Romello and his party returned to Tasmeria later that day.

Chapter 11:

The Future Duchess's Break

THE ACADEMY WAS ON an extended break, so I went home to the Anderson manor to make the most of my time off. I had a wonderful time visiting everyone who had been so kind to me before I started school. I walked through town, seeing everything that had changed for better or for worse. Sometimes I would take trips to see famous sights around the kingdom as well. On top of this, I participated in training as Mer, of course, and I also attended etiquette lessons with Lady Aurelia.

“Now, shall we start with this today?”

But the thing that took up most of my time was preparing for a welcoming party for guests who would be arriving from Rimmel. The party itself wouldn't be for a while and was on the last day of my break from school, but I wasn't sure how we would get everything done before then.

Honestly, I was thankful that I had this time to work on it. The language spoken in Rimmel was very similar to Tasmerian and I had already learned it with Lady Aurelia, so that was no problem. I did think it might be a good idea to review with her, however.

There was also the matter of what I would wear to the party. I had already met with Louis to coordinate colors with him. He was planning to wear a tie the same color as my dress.

I had to study up on the land of Rimmel as well. Since we were the hosts, it was natural that I learn as much about the country as I could. I read every book about Rimmel's history and culture that I could get my hands on.

Lady Aurelia and Louis recommended some additional books to me as well, so I was slowly building up my knowledge on the subject.

When Louis had free time, he would tell me more about diplomatic relations between Tasmeria and Rimmel, and the state of affairs between Rimmel and other nations in the world.

“Excuse me, my lady.”

“Oh, Anna. What is it?”

“It’s time for your meeting with Lady Sharia.”

“It’s that time already? Thank you, Anna. Help me get ready, would you?”

Anna helped me dress, and then we headed to Count Telrose’s manor. Sharia was my very first female friend my own age. The only other friends I had who were young women were probably the ladies from Madam’s establishment or the girls who had recently joined in training. The former were more confidants than friends—women who could give me advice. Meanwhile, the latter were just comrades-in-arms who had made it through Father’s training with me.

As you could imagine, I was absolutely thrilled to be able to visit a friend’s house like this.

“Welcome, Merellis!”

“Thank you so much for inviting me.”

Sharia led me to her room. “Of course! Actually, I wanted to apologize. I planned to take you to the theatre, but my parents wouldn’t let me!”

“Well, that can’t be helped, you know? We’d be getting home quite late from the theatre. I’m sure your parents would worry.”

“There’s nothing to be worried about if I’m with you. Everyone’s still overprotective about me since the incident.”

“Well, your father doesn’t know about my training, so saying you’re with me would do nothing to ease his mind. Plus, it makes sense that he’s worried, after what happened to you.”

“Still... I’m not engaged yet. He turns down all invitations to parties unless they’re official events. Even if someone did offer their hand, he’d probably turn them down, saying it’s too soon because he’s concerned! Every time there’s something I want to do, he says no. I mean, I’m grateful he cares about me so much, but it makes me feel guilty that they’re so worried about me all the time... They say no to this and no to that. I feel like a caged bird! And if they keep me cooped up like this, I’ll grow weak. So even if it’s hard or painful...I’ve

decided that I need to fly off into the big sky on my own.”

I laughed, thinking how that was so like her to say.

“How can we ever thank you for doing that for us?”

I remembered how she said that with such a brave smile when I rescued her and the other girls from the kidnappers all that time ago. I believed that no matter how hard the situation might be for her in the future, she wouldn’t regret it as long as it was a path she chose for herself. In fact, the hardships would probably just motivate her more. Although she may not be physically strong, she was strong of will and heart.

I hadn’t known her for very long, but that just showed how much of an impact her words had on me. I admired my friend’s strength very much.

“What is it, Merellis?”

“Hm?”

“You laughed. Did I say something funny?”

“No. I was just thinking how that’s so like you.”

“Oh,” Sharia giggled.

“By the way, Sharia. You’re going to attend the next official event, right?”

“Yes, I am. Father can’t refuse a party thrown by the prime minister, of course. You’re going too, right? Have you chosen a dress?”

“Yes, I ordered one already. It’s an old-style sack-back gown, the kind with pleats down the back. Since it’s rather low cut to show off the décolleté in exchange, I’m making sure to take extra good care of my skin lately.”

“Oh, a sack-back gown! Is there a specific reason why you chose that kind?”

“I found a fabric I really loved, and I thought that would be the best design to show it off.”

“He he he. I can’t wait to see your dress! Everyone’s always dying to see what you’ll wear to parties. I keep hearing people talking about it.”

“Goodness! I’ll certainly have to make sure I put in extra effort then!” Both of us looked at each other and laughed. “Speaking of engagements, though, is

there anyone who's caught your eye?"

"His Highness still doesn't have a fiancée, and there are still quite a few girls who aren't engaged either. And because of that, there are a lot of men who haven't decided on someone yet. I'm sure I'll end up engaged to one of them."

"Ah..." I was surprised at her cold tone of voice, but once I thought about it, that was the kind of response you could expect from a girl like her. Marriage between nobles was political, to strengthen the ties between families and ensure their wealth. Speaking from that perspective, there was no better match than the one between Houses Anderson and Armelia. The family that had produced generations of prime ministers would join with the military family that had produced the kingdom's hero. It was like a fairy tale, especially since we had met by coincidence in town and fell in love on our own. It was more coincidental than anything you might read about in a novel.

"Well, I have no room to be worried about other people, but I'd really love it if the prince hurried up and decided on a fiancée already. All the other girls our age who aren't engaged yet are all competing to see who will win the prize of being at the prince's hand. The rivalry between both the men and the women is honestly getting tiring," Sharia said with a sigh.

"Hmm, I see. And the worst one is Marquis Marea's daughter, isn't it?"

"Yes, Lady Ellia. She's very aggressive with girls who aren't engaged. Of course, she does it sneakily so the men never see her do it. That makes her even scarier."

"No wonder she's the marquis' daughter. He's so forceful, he could knock down a bird in flight."

House Marea... It wasn't a very prestigious family, historically speaking. They'd only gained prominence in the last generation or so. They formed enough ties with more established families to the point where not even the most powerful families like House Armelia and the royal family could not ignore them.

Naturally, Ellia was the top contender to become the prince's fiancée, and it seemed that she was incredibly attached to the idea of marrying the prince as well. Because of that, both father and daughter were putting pressure on

everyone they could to advance the engagement. I could only imagine how that felt to Sharia, who was still unengaged. And... No. For a moment my thoughts went in another direction, but I stopped myself. I was here with Sharia, so I should make the most out of my visit and not lose myself in my thoughts.

“Well, you may not have time since it’s an official party, but I pray that you’ll find a lovely partner there! After all, you’re such a wonderful girl. Don’t worry; I’m sure you’ll find someone soon.”

Sharia smiled. “It makes me feel better hearing you say that, Merellis.”

After that, we enjoyed chatting about desserts and dresses that had become popular lately. We had such a good time that the hours went by very quickly. After I’d stayed for a while, I eventually left the Telrose manor. I got in the carriage but hopped out before I arrived back home. Anna seemed puzzled by my behavior and followed after me.

I needed to sort through things in my mind, and nothing was better for that than a stroll through town. As I walked down the narrow cobblestone streets, I lost myself in my thoughts, picking up where I had left off during my visit with Sharia. The thing that was weighing on my mind was that the opposition between noble families was going to grow more and more. House Marea was gathering the support of more and more powerful families, and I had a feeling that families with opposing viewpoints would start to band together in response.

None of this was happening on the surface yet, but I’d gotten little inklings of it here and there. That would have an effect on the marriages between nobles because they treated marriage as a political convenience. It was no wonder that girls from each faction were vying to marry the heir to the throne. When both the children and parents of these families saw this happening, it made sense that everyone was anxious to cement an engagement. People who weren’t yet betrothed like Sharia must’ve been having a rough time. The competition and rivalry between girls our age to get the best husband they could was quite intense.

And at the same time, I could imagine just how tired Lord Romello was. We had finally gotten a cease-fire with Tweil, and now there was going to be a

power struggle between nobles in our own kingdom. Once the threat of outside danger was gone, it seemed people naturally began to create quarrels within their own circles.

I didn't want to think that my father risking his life to protect this kingdom had been all for naught. Not only had many people sacrificed their lives, but we had finally gotten peace. But now, there were people who were threatening to fan the flames of strife again. Lord Romello had to waste his precious energy on dealing with infighting among nobles when he should be focusing on running the government. I wondered if he was feeling disillusioned by the whole thing too.

"I wish I could help him..." I murmured. Anna gave me a puzzled look. "No, it's nothing. I'm just talking to myself." I pulled myself together and looked around. It was breezy, and the wind shook the trees lining the street. I paused for a moment, then began walking once more, losing myself in thought again.

Talking about it wouldn't do any good anyway. I once again came to the realization that my next battlefield would be that of high society. Everyone had a limit to their own power. Just as one person was powerless against ten thousand. You needed help from other people to succeed, even in government.

In that case, the best thing I could do was to lessen the burden for Lord Romello—and for Louis who would come after him—by staving off the power struggle between the nobles as much as I could. And to do that, I needed power of my own. I needed to wield the power of persuasion in order to help people, just like when I had commanded the soldiers and guards to fight that day my brother was attacked. They had obeyed me then, even though I had no right to give those orders, because I had been convincing enough.

I needed persuasion, a strong will, and experience. A strong will would come from having no hesitation in my words or actions, based on my experiences. In other words, I needed to have confidence in myself, which would lead me to be able to persuade others.

I wanted to become stronger.

So strong that my will could pierce through the viper pit of the world of high society.

With renewed resolve in my heart, I turned around and made my way back home.

After that, I worked hard to secure my place in society. I accepted almost every invitation from any house that had sent me one before I entered the academy and held many tea parties of my own. I also sought out introductions to families I had never met before and made an effort to build relationships with them. In my free time, I took additional lessons with Lady Aurelia focusing on the art of conversation.

And, of course, I was still training in the blade with Father amidst all that.

I filled my time so completely that my vacation from school was over before I knew it.

“Abel never did show up...” I murmured to myself as I looked at the scenery pass by outside the carriage window.

“Did you really want to see him that much?” Anna asked.

“Yes. He’s been on my mind.” Not a single person we trained with could tell me where he was stationed now. I thought Kreuz or Verlys, my father’s right-hand man, would certainly know, but they both avoided the question.

I went and visited the soldiers myself and didn’t see Abel anywhere. I couldn’t help but wonder who he really was. My curiosity kept creeping into the back of my mind.

“I suppose it makes sense that you want to spar with him again.”

Sparring with him was thrilling. I didn’t know why he was hiding, but he was definitely the strongest out of all the people who participated in my father’s training sessions. And that was why I wanted to continue facing off with him, and for him to spar with Anna and Enarene too.

Before I knew it, I had arrived back at the academy. I got out of the carriage and looked up at the building looming before me. I felt strangely nostalgic, even though I had only been gone for a short time. Anna went and carried my things to my dorm to unpack them for me before she would get back into the carriage

and leave.

After I saw her off, I sat on a bench in the garden, on the opposite side of the chapel.

“Oh, Lady Merellis. Long time no see.”

“Hello, Lord Doruna.” Suddenly Doruna emerged from the school building and came up to me. “How is Lord Pax?”

I wasn’t expecting him to ask me that, and I froze for a moment. “E-er, he’s fine, of course. He hasn’t been to the capital much lately because he’s been busy running things back in the march.”

“I see...”

“Excuse me, but...how do you know my brother?” I honestly had no idea how the two of them would be connected. My brother much preferred spending time with a strategist like Verlys rather than a big, muscular man who’d fight on the front lines like Doruna.

“I met him while participating in the royal army training at the castle. He broke my nose in the process.”

“Goodness!” I burst out laughing at this anecdote about my brother I’d never heard about before. “Forgive me for asking, but that must have shocked you, no?”

Sometimes things like that would happen. Someone would underestimate my brother, get cocky, challenge him to a fight...and then they would lose spectacularly. After all, he certainly didn’t look like he would be the son of General Gazell, and at the same time, soldiers and knights who adored our father would look down on him.

But after all, my brother was still the heir to the esteemed military might of House Anderson. He had been trained personally by my father from a young age, so he was not weak in the slightest.

“Yes. It was a good experience for me. It made me realize just how sheltered and wrong I was about a lot of things.”

“Interesting... So if I had met you back then, you would have been very

different? Now I wish I would have.”

“Please... Looking back on it now fills me with nothing but shame.”

“He he. Fine, then. I’ll just ask my brother for details.”

“I surrender, good lady!” He put up both hands in surrender, making me laugh yet again. “Are you here to meet Louis, Lady Merellis?”

“Yes, of course. How about you? Are you meeting someone?”

His face began to turn red. *How adorable*, I thought, smiling at him.

Most people who came here did it with the intent of meeting their special someones. You could use the dormitory lounges to chat with friends of your own sex, of course, but this was about the only place you could see someone of the opposite sex. For the most part, engaged couples often met here.

In other words, I was asking him, “*Are you here to meet your fiancée?*” And that was why he had blushed.

“Y-yes, I am.”

“Oh! Well then, I shouldn’t keep you. Go on and hurry to her.”

“I’ll do just that. If you’ll excuse me.”

I sat back down on the bench after he left.

A few minutes later, Louis showed up. “Sorry I made you wait!”

“It’s all right. I was talking to Lord Doruna while I waited.”

“Doruna? Oh, was he here to meet his fiancée?”

“Yes, it seems that way.”

Louis took a seat next to me. I put my hand on his cheek and studied his face. Even though we’d both had an extended vacation, we were so busy we barely had time to see each other. We only met once or twice during it to discuss what we would be wearing to the party with Rimmel, and to discuss proper etiquette and such. It had actually been a while since I last saw him.

“I knew it. You’ve got dark circles under your eyes.”

“I know.” He smiled sheepishly at me, then gently placed a hand on mine.

Then with his other hand he caressed my cheek. I put my hand over his, just as he had done to me.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Hm, nothing. Just feeling relaxed.”

“Don’t forget we’re in public...” I hastily glanced around. He must’ve been really tired, and I couldn’t blame him. His nerves were probably shot from dealing with all the preparations necessary for Rimmel’s visit. “I know that you’re working hard, and I know how much pressure you’re under with your job. But please, take care of your health. I wish I could just take away all your fatigue. After all, my stamina’s my best quality!”

Louis chuckled in response. “I really don’t deserve a fiancée like you.” I gave him a puzzled look, not understanding what he meant, and he continued. “I just mean, you help me so much. Just hearing you say that gives me a boost.”

His words made me so happy that I felt my cheeks flush.

“Lady Merellis, will you be coming to my tea party this weekend?”

“Oh no, please come to mine instead!”

After class, I was immediately surrounded by a group of girls as soon as I entered the parlor. Since I had spent my break forging stronger connections to various families, word must have somehow made it to school as well as I ended up being absolutely swamped with invitations.

I was grateful, though, because it was important for me to befriend people my own age. I politely responded to all of them and then went to go sit down alone.

“Hello, Lady Merellis. May I sit here?”

“Oh, Lady Foulard. Of course, have a seat.”

Lady Foulard was Count Dranbaldt’s daughter and Dan’s fiancée.

“By the way, Lady Merellis. I heard you wore a beautiful ruby necklace to the tea party at Count Caldina’s manor. Everyone’s just dying to know where you

got it.”

“Oh, really? I’m flattered that everyone liked it.”

“I’m one of them, of course! Would you perhaps consider telling me who made it for you?”

“He he he. You liked it too, Lady Foulard? Of course I’ll tell you, but I do have to wait until after the dukes from Rimmel leave. Apparently the jeweler is in quite a panic because I ordered a bit too much from them! I promise I’ll tell you once the visit is over.”

“Oh, all right. But make sure you let me know before any of the others! I know that jeweler will be swamped with requests if you wear their pieces to an official event.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it. Every time you wear a new dress or piece of jewelry, everyone rushes to that same store to get one of their own. And you don’t just work with famous designers either—you find lesser-known talents and help others discover them! Everyone is so excited to see what you’ll wear next!”

“You flatter me with all your compliments, dear. But I promise. I’ll tell you first, before anyone else.”

“He he he. I can’t wait!”

We chatted for a while, but all of a sudden, the entire room went silent. Ellia, the daughter of Marquis Marea, had entered. She had a group of girlfriends flocking around her. It would probably be more accurate to call them her cronies.

“Hello, Lady Merellis.”

“Lady Ellia. Long time no see.”

“Excuse me, but who is that?” She spoke politely, but the look in her eyes was anything but that as she turned her gaze toward Foulard.

I felt a spark of irritation but put a smile on my face, doing my best to conceal my feelings. “This is Lady Foulard, Baron Adram’s daughter.”

“Oh, is that right?” Despite the question, Ellia sounded wholly uninterested. Normally when one was introduced to someone for the first time, you’d at least make small talk or curtsy. Instead, she completely ignored Foulard.

“She’s engaged to Count Dranbaldt’s son, Dan,” I said, testing how she’d react to that one.

“Oh, really?! Well, I’m very envious to hear that!” Just as I suspected, her attitude completely changed once she heard Foulard was engaged. The young woman really was simpleminded. “Speaking of engagement, Lady Merellis. Will you be attending the party sponsored by the kingdom with Lord Louis?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Oh, I’m jealous. I don’t have a fiancé yet, so I’m going with my family. Aren’t there any good men out there?”

She was being so transparent it was difficult to hold back my laughter. Apparently, she—or perhaps her father—had finally gotten the message that I was very influential in high society. She was trying to get me to put in a good word for her with Prince Edgar. And if I did that, that would send a clear message to other families.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll do just fine finding a fiancé without *my* help, Lady Ellia.” I had long since decided I was going to stay out of it, so I just smiled at her.

“That’s a shame.”

She didn’t press the issue any further and left. I apologized to Foulard for the intrusion, and then we continued chatting about the latest fashions.

The day of the party where we would be welcoming the dukes of Rimmel to Tasmeria was here at last. A celebratory mood spread through the whole kingdom, but inside the palace, the tension was great. Since the academy catered to children of nobles, we were given a special day off school for the occasion.

I headed to the party with Louis, wearing a dress made especially for me by Madame Crejours. It was a white, low-cut dress with a fitted bodice. I wore a

light-yellow coat over it with sack-back pleats in the back. The coat was elaborately embroidered with jewels sewn into the design. Another detail was that both the dress and the coat were edged with a kind of delicate lace I'd never seen before. The dress's skirt had a simple petticoat design that made it easy to put on and take off. I finished the look with a golden choker studded with pearls around my neck, pearl earrings, and layered pearl bracelets. The jewelry pieces were all presents from Louis, and he wore a light-yellow tie to match my outfit.

He led me down the long hallway through the castle. It was customary for nobles of lower rank to enter first and so on in that manner, so by the time we entered the room, most everyone was already gathered. Louis hadn't formally received his title yet, but since Lord Romello had officially named him as his successor, it was all right for him to enter at that time.

The glitzy chandeliers made the polished wooden floors shine. All the noblewomen were dressed in their finest clothes, clearly trying to outdo each other. The men all had imposing auras about them as they stood by their sides.

No matter how many times I came to parties like this, they never got any less intimidating.

And then, all of a sudden, the music stopped.

"Her Majesty the Queen, escorted by her son, His Royal Highness Prince Edgar!"

Everyone bowed their heads as Queen Iria and Prince Edgar entered. No one lifted their gaze until the two of them had taken their seats, and then everyone's attention focused back on the herald again.

"His Grace Duke Chester Crowe of the principality of Rimmel!" Everyone greeted the duke with applause.

"His Grace Duke Dennis Baskar and his son, Lord Colin Baskar of Rimmel!" A man who was quite broad but muscular entered the room, accompanied by a young man who looked very much like his father.

"His Grace Duke Bruno Philling and his wife, Her Grace Duchess Kellie Philling!" An intelligent-looking man wearing glasses entered the room,

escorting his wife. The woman had a gentle smile on her face.

“His Grace Duke Curtis Sligar and his son, Lord Miles Sligar!” *Hmm, I thought the duke had two sons?* Miles was his youngest son, so I wondered if the older son Curtis wasn’t here. When Louis had told me about the family, I was hoping I’d meet both of them. I carefully observed Duke Sligar. He had jet black hair and sharp eyes that had a certain glint about them. They sent a shiver down my spine.

“His Grace Duke Morris Grindel and his wife, Her Grace Duchess Lynette Grindel!” The last duke to enter the room was a muscular man who I was sure would be quite fierce in a fight. Conversely, his wife Lynette was very slender and frail. She looked as if she might break if you touched her.

We watched as the dukes exchanged greetings with the queen and the prince in turn. I heard Louis let out a little sigh beside me. He must be very relieved that this day had finally arrived.

The music began to play, and people paired off to dance. Louis and I made our way to the center of the dance floor and began to dance.

“Everything went smoothly...” he murmured to me.

“I’m so happy for you, Louis.”

We danced to one song and then separated.

“May I have this dance?” Colin Baskar held out his hand to me.

“I’d be honored, Lord Colin.” I took his hand, and we began to move to the music.

“The kingdom of Tasmeria is filled with so many beautiful people. But you are the most beautiful. It makes me happy that I came here.”

“Oh, you flatter me! You know, different blossoms bloom in different kingdoms, but it seems you’ve grown quite fond of our flowers, Lord Colin.” I skillfully dodged his flirtations and indirectly thanked him for the compliment. I could see the unabashed desire in his eyes, and it gave me the chills. All I wanted was for the song to be over, but of course I had to keep the smile on my face while I endured.

Finally, the song ended, and I moved on to my next partner, Miles Sligar. Miles danced as if he were bored of the whole affair, yet knew he had to keep up appearances, and so he partnered up with me anyway. It was better than dancing with Colin, though. Suddenly, I looked over to Prince Edgar. A few moments prior, Ellia had gotten her clutches into him and he danced with her, but now he was dancing with Sharia.

Wait—with *Sharia*?!

I was so surprised I couldn't help but stare at the couple, all while trying not to be rude to Miles. Why in the world had Prince Edgar asked Sharia to dance? She could offer no political connections at an event such as this. Sharia looked a bit bewildered as well. On the other side of them, Ellia was shooting them a glare so sharp that it was almost frightening.

I finished dancing with Miles and then excused myself. I met up with Louis again, and we began making our rounds through the guests.

We started off by going to speak with Duke Morris Grindel.

"Good evening, Duke Grindel. Are you enjoying yourself tonight?" Louis had already met the duke when he arrived, so there was no need to introduce himself again.

Duke Morris smiled pleasantly at him. "Ah, Lord Louis! Yes, of course. I'm enjoying myself immensely."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

"And who is this young lady?" Morris asked, smiling at me.

"Oh, allow me to introduce you. This is my fiancée, Merellis Reiser Anderson."

"Good evening. It's a pleasure to meet you and your wife, Duke Morris."

"The pleasure is all mine. All the rumors I heard about the famous Gazell's daughter were true. You are very beautiful, Miss."

"Now now, don't be a flirt, darling. You are gorgeous though, like a porcelain doll!" his wife remarked.

"Thank you very much." I bowed my head to them.

“Hm? Oh, I see...”

For a moment, Morris looked puzzled by what Lynette had just said, but then he nodded with satisfaction. “I meant not only do you have a lovely face, but even your movements are beautiful, Lady Merellis.”

I suddenly felt a cold sweat forming on my back. House Morris was known for being a military family, just like my own. I wondered if he had surmised from the way I carried myself that I was also a trained fighter.

“Oh, that’s what you meant! Yes, her movements are very clean. I thought it was strange for you to comment on a woman’s looks, Morris, but she is so lovely that I can understand why.”

I quickly followed Lynette’s response. “You’re too kind. I owe it all to my education from both my father and from Lady Aurelia, Louis’s mother.”

“Lady Aurelia, is it?” Morris repeated, but he didn’t ask any further questions. I just had to pray that my practice moving like a lady with Louis’s mother was showing off more than my training with a sword.

“Lady Lynette, would you have time the day after tomorrow to talk more? I heard that Louis has plans with the duke.”

“Oh, I’d love to! While the men talk about complicated matters, we ladies can enjoy ourselves! Please, come to where I’m staying! I’ll send you an invitation later.”

“Thank you! I can’t wait.”

Louis and Morris were having their own conversation while we chatted, but since we were at a party, the topics were kept light. After that, we bade each other farewell and headed toward Curtis Sligar. Louis and I had discussed beforehand who we would talk to and in which order. We waited until Lord Romello and Lady Aurelia were finished talking to Duke Sligar. Once they went on to talk to Duke Grindel, it became our turn to talk to Duke Sligar.

“Ah, you’re Duke Armelia’s son Louis, right?” Curtis said to us. Louis had greeted all the dukes when they arrived, so they already recognized him.

“Yes, I’m Louis de Armelia. And this is my fiancée, Merellis Reiser Anderson.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Anderson? Don’t tell me your father’s...?” His gaze grew sharp as he stared at me.

“Yes, that’s right. My father is General Gazell.”

“I see. I never would have guessed the famous general’s daughter was so beautiful. Pardon me for staring.”

“It’s all right. I’m used to people’s surprise. I take after my mother.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. By the way, I don’t see my son right now, but you were dancing with him earlier, yes?”

“Oh, yes, I was.” Apparently, Curtis was very interested in me now that he found out who my father was. He had only said a few words to the people who had greeted him earlier, so it seemed we were taking up quite a bit of his time.

“How was your journey here from Rimmel?”

“It was quite pleasant. You know, you should come visit Rimmel sometime and see how you like it! After the treaty is signed, of course. I’d love for you to visit my duchy.”

“Oh my, thank you for the invitation!” I certainly hadn’t been expecting that and was caught off guard for a second, but I quickly recovered with a smile.

We chatted pleasantly for a few more moments before moving on.

After that, we spoke with Dukes Philling, Baskar, and Crowe. Once we finished, I excused myself to the powder room to fix my makeup. After that, I stepped out onto the balcony to get some fresh air. I was warm from being around all those people inside, so the night breeze felt wonderful.

I began to sense a strange presence in the garden. The palace had tightened security today for the occasion, of course, and the guards and servants had been under strict orders not to let any unauthorized people onto the grounds. So then, why...?



Curious, I left the balcony and headed down to the garden. On the way there, I stopped by an empty room and slipped off the bustle meant to add volume to my skirt. I removed my petticoat and overcoat as well. I then grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped the ribbons off of the bustle. There was also a tablecloth in the room, so I draped it over my head and secured it with the ribbons.

I took off my shoes and hid them in a corner, and then picked up a cloth that was draped over the back of a sofa. I ripped it in half to tie over both my feet as makeshift slippers. Lastly, I took out the dagger I had hidden in my shoe.

Now that I was disguised and it would be much easier to move, I slipped through the night to the garden.

“How was it?”

“Fine. Plans one through five were carried out successfully.”

There were two guards wearing army uniforms, but I didn’t recognize them. They were not supposed to be down here at all. On top of that, their conversation was very suspicious. I didn’t want to be mistaken, so I decided to knock one of them out and question the other. However, it would be difficult since I didn’t have the usual reach of my sword, but this was no time to complain.

I made up my mind and approached them, hitting one of them in the back of the head with the hilt of my dagger, knocking him out cold. While the other was surprised, I grabbed him from behind and held my dagger at his throat.

“No strange movements or I’ll kill you. Don’t move a muscle.” My voice was so low and hostile I could hardly believe it was my own.

“Who are you...?”

The man trembled at my question. “Who are *you*?!”

“Shh! Be quiet!” I pressed the dagger harder into his neck, and a crimson line dripped down his skin. “Now, tell me who you are. I know you’re not a soldier. There should be no guards out here.”

“How do you know that? I’m a soldier from the first regiment of the royal army! Kreuz told me to guard this place yesterday!”

“I see. Thank you.” I cut the man without hesitation. Kreuz had told me just this morning all the guards’ positions. He reported them to my father, and I had gotten special permission as Mer to hear the information. In other words, this man was lying. Also, a soldier from the army wouldn’t *ever* come guard the castle. That was the job for knights, not for soldiers. Kreuz had told us where all the knights would be as well.

Not only that, but the first regiment was completely made up of men my father had trained, so I knew all of them personally. I had trained with them myself at House Anderson as Mer, after all. I covered the man’s mouth to suppress his scream as he crumpled into a heap.

“Unfortunately for you, *I’m* in the first regiment. So? Why are you here?”

“As if I’d tell you...”

“That’s a shame. Should I see how long you can hold to that?” My mind raced as I tried to figure out how to get him to talk. Unfortunately, torture was out of my wheelhouse. I had to scare him somehow. I had to frighten him out of his mind first, and then once he was relieved, it would be easier to get him to talk. I knelt down and glared at him at eye-level. He was still trembling. I could see the fear in his eyes. *What had I done to frighten him?* I wondered, but this was a good time to try again.

“*Who. Are. You.*”

He seemed to be mulling over his answer. Maybe if I assured him his life wouldn’t be in danger, he’d talk. But I didn’t want to lie either. I never had any intention of letting him walk. “I’m going to ask you *one more time*. Who are you?”

His lips were sealed. Even though he was my enemy, I had to hand it to him. But, after all, I wasn’t suited to be an interrogator. Just as I killed the man, the one I knocked out first was starting to come to. The moment he regained consciousness, he surmised what was going on and opened his mouth to scream.

I quickly slapped my hand over his mouth. “You’ll tell me why you’re here, won’t you?”

He nodded several times.

“So? What is your mission?”

“T-to kill the people from Rimmel.”

I expected him to say that, but I felt my brain freeze with anger. Lord Romello and Louis had worked so hard to arrange everything today, and here these men were trying to ruin it all.

“Is that so. All of them?”

“Y-yes.”

“Who hired you?”

“I-I don’t know...” I glared at him, and he said, “I-I swear!”

“How many of you are there?”

“Thirty...”

Too many, I thought. It was possible I’d come across them at someone’s party before or that they were even people who regularly came here. While I was distracted by this, the man grabbed his sword again and tried to attack me. I cursed myself for letting down my guard and killed him without hesitation. I let out a deep sigh as I looked down at the two men, lying dead on the ground.

I would *not* let this happen. This party was the first step toward stronger ties between Rimmel and Tasmeria. And this attempted attack was an insult against Lord Romello, who believed in peace. Even if whoever was behind this plot thought they were doing it for the good of the kingdom, they were sorely mistaken. Violence was not the answer, and it would not lead to a peaceful solution. It was pulling the trigger to start a war.

My anger surged inside of me once again when I looked at the men’s bodies, and I sprang into action. Where were the others hiding? I stayed as far away from the party as I could as I searched. I found three men wearing soldier’s uniforms in another place where there were not supposed to be any guards stationed. Were they really soldiers, or were they enemies? I snuck up behind the group and whacked one of them in the temple with the hilt of my dagger.

I punched the second one in the gut. But as I turned around to knock the third

one unconscious, I saw someone had beat me to it. And then that someone lunged toward *me*. I gripped my dagger and reflexively countered his attack. He was strong. I could tell with just that one blow, and I grimaced. Under normal circumstances, I'd welcome a strong opponent like this, but right now, he was too dangerous.

Then, I caught a glimpse of the man's face, and I suddenly froze with shock.

"Wait, are you Ab—"

He quickly placed a finger over his lips to shush me, then realized that he recognized my voice. "What are you doing here, Mer?!" He hissed at me quietly.

"That's what I wanna know! I thought you were supposed to be doing desk work? No matter how strong you are, there's no way they'd put someone with a desk job here tonight! It doesn't make any sense. And why are you dressed like that?!"

He wasn't wearing a military uniform. He was dressed all in black. He honestly looked even more suspicious than the enemies. *Wait, is Abel...*

He realized I was suspicious of him and let out a deep sigh. "You probably won't believe this, but I'll tell you later. I can't have Tasmeria attacking Rimmel either, so will you please let me take care of it?"

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't listen to someone acting so suspicious. But it was true that he had knocked out one of my enemies. I imagined we had the same goal. Still...

"No." I refused, and I watched his gaze grow sharper in response. Ever since we had crossed swords, his entire demeanor was so intense, a far cry from the gentle personality he'd shown while we trained together. Or perhaps he'd only shown me a fragment of his true nature back then. Still, he seemed like a totally different person...and it was so amusing that I laughed.

But my excitement cooled in an instant, replaced by another emotion. "Did you really think I'd withdraw?"

Abel's face tensed up slightly.

“I’m mad. I’m mad at the people who tried to ruin this party. And now that I know they’re here, there’s no way I’m backing down.” I glared back at Abel, and he stared back at me.

We just silently stared at each other, but he was the one who backed down first. He let out a deep sigh and gave me a sheepish smile. “Unfortunately, I just don’t know how to convince you otherwise. I’d rather cooperate with you than have you get in my way. I’d appreciate your help.”

“Of course. I was just thinking it would be difficult for me to take care of all the enemies who snuck in the palace on my own. It was a good thing we ran into each other. You can tell me why you don’t want Rimmel attacked later, but since we have the same goal, I’ll trust you. That doesn’t change the fact that I’m suspicious of you, though. And if you don’t tell me once this is all over, I’ll arrest you and take you to my father.”

“I know you won’t keep quiet about meeting me here, so let’s share the information we have about the situation with each other.”

We went ahead and did that. I told him where I killed the other men and what I had found out. He told me where the others were and how many of them were in each place. He said the enemies all had the top two buttons of their uniform unbuttoned to distinguish each other from legitimate guards. But they were fools, because like I said, there would be no occasion where the royal army would ever come guard the castle, so if we saw anyone wearing that uniform, we could attack them without question.

After we were done talking, we went our separate ways to hunt our targets. I snuck toward the first location Abel had told me about, careful not to draw attention to myself. It seemed they were stationed in these locations and weren’t moving.

I approached them, confirmed that their top two buttons were undone, and attacked. One fell to the ground while the other two lunged at me. I dodged and took both of them out. They were weak. I should’ve been relieved, but I was surprised that they fell so easily. Abel said he’d take care of the bodies later, so I headed toward my next goal.

I went after the enemies in that manner and checked all the locations Abel

had told me about. Once I was finished, I returned to the spot we had promised to meet.

“I finished that up faster than I expected, thanks to your help. I’ll take care of the rest,” said Abel.

“Excuse me? Where’s my explanation?”

“I’ll be returning to the Anderson manor to train in three days. Will you let me have until then?”

Honestly, I wanted to know what was going on right that instant. But since the army must know his true identity, if he didn’t show up when he promised, they wouldn’t be able to tell me they didn’t know who he was. I also couldn’t stay here for much longer. I slipped away from the party without telling anyone, so I had to get back soon. It was best for me to withdraw for now, so we agreed to meet again in three days.

“Fine. But if you don’t show up, I’ll spring into action immediately.”

“I know.”

We went our separate ways and I returned to the room where I had changed. I put my dagger away, took off the tablecloth, and put my shoes back on. I grabbed my coat and petticoat and gave them to Anna who was waiting in my dressing room and then returned to the party. I had been gone for a very long time. I could tell by the mood inside the castle that I had made the right decision by not mending my bustle.

Since I wasn’t wearing my coat or petticoat anymore, it revealed my empire waistline dress. Anna had given me a stole to wear over it though. However, it was a drastically different look than when I had left. I coincidentally ran into Louis on the way back.

“Are you all right?” I could tell he was worried by his tone of voice and the look on his face. I felt bad about it, and I cursed my own powerlessness and carelessness. But at the same time, it made me happy that he cared so much.

“Yes. I just wanted to clean up a bit.”

Louis immediately realized that I wasn’t talking about changing my dress or

fixing my makeup. His face clouded over, but then he smiled. “You look beautiful. That dress looks wonderful on you.”

I smiled, wondering how he knew what I meant. I slipped my arm through his, and we returned to the party together. The guests all noticed I had changed outfits, so I went around and chatted with them some more. At the end, I stayed behind to say goodbye to the dukes from Rimmel.

The party ended without incident, and thankfully no one tried to attack anyone in the palace. It was as if nothing had ever happened. The festival-like excitement lingered in the air, and the next three days passed quickly.

I dressed as Mer, waiting for Abel to show. I was supposed to have tea with Morris and Lynette later that afternoon. I was afraid that I’d be too amped up from training when I met with them, so I decided not to participate. Instead, I watched Anna and Enarene train from my room. I looked for Abel, but I didn’t see him. *Did he run away?* I wondered, but I just kept standing there, waiting.

The morning’s training session ended. Everyone began cleaning up and then left the training grounds. At that time, Abel finally showed up at the manor, wearing his uniform. I probably wouldn’t have been able to find him if I hadn’t been looking for him; that’s how well he blended in. He went to the front door without anyone noticing. I was just about to go see him when suddenly Anna came and told me, “Lord Louis is here to see you, my lady.”

“What? Already? He wasn’t supposed to come until this afternoon.”

Anna looked a bit bewildered at my reaction. “Yes, that’s true... What should we do? You’re not ready...”

“I can’t keep Duke Grindel waiting. I should get dressed.”

“Ah, no—your appointment with Duke Grindel is still this afternoon. Lord Louis says he wishes to speak with you before then, so he came early. He’s talking to General Gazell right now.”

“Is he? I can go dressed like this then.”

“Are you sure it’s all right to see him like that, my lady?”

“He knows that I’m Mer. Plus, and I’m sorry to say this, but my first priority right now is meeting with Abel. There’s something I simply must speak to him about.”

“Very well. Forgive me for not telling you sooner, but Abel is currently speaking with General Gazell as well. Shall I show him to the parlor once he’s done?”

“He’s here to see my father?”

“Yes. I’m sure it’s fine for you to go see him there, if you wish.”

“All right. I’ll go now, then. It’ll be easier to see Louis and Abel together.”

I stood up and headed to my father’s study. I knocked on the door and went inside. Just as Anna said, Louis, Abel, and my father were already there.

“Ah, so there you are, Lady Merellis,” Abel had an amused look on his face, and I froze. I wondered why—how—he knew that.

“Wh-what did you just say?” I finally said.

Louis and my father exchanged glances and laughed.

“I’m sorry. To be honest, I already knew that you were Mer.” Abel gave me a guilty look, and I heaved a sigh.

I told myself to calm down. My father and Louis were smiling, so I supposed it was fine that he knew. “Fine. So? You’re going to tell me, aren’t you?” I glared at him. I didn’t know if it was because I still thought him suspicious or that I was annoyed at the two who were smiling.

“Yes. That’s why I asked Lord Louis to come here.”

“Huh?”

I glanced over at Louis, and he nodded with a sheepish smile.

“First of all, General Gazell. Thank you so much for making time for me on such short notice. This is the only place all three of us can speak without raising suspicions.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have a feeling I’m about to hear a very interesting story because of it,” my father said.

“Lady Merellis, please allow me to apologize. Can you please tell me what you saw that day? That will explain the situation to General Gazell as well.”

“That’s true. Three days ago, at the party, I went to get some air on the balcony. I happened to see some suspicious-looking people in the garden. They were wearing royal army uniforms and claimed to be in the first regiment. I didn’t recognize them, however, and no one was supposed to be stationed in that position. So, I took care of them. I learned they had been ordered to kill the dukes from Rimmel and that there were thirty of them, so I began searching for them throughout the palace. That’s when I ran into Abel, who was also hunting for them.”

“They disguised themselves as soldiers?”

“Yes.”

My father’s face turned serious, and then I realized he had no idea all of this had been going on.

“Lord Louis. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I had to be very careful because it involved your own regiment. I wanted to wait until I had enough evidence, which Merellis and Abel have provided.”

Father let out a deep sigh and stared at me. “Merellis, continue, please.”

“There’s not much else to say. I cooperated with Abel, and we killed the rest of them. That’s all I know.”

“I see.”

“Will you please explain, Abel? Who are you, and how did you know they were going to attack that night?” I turned my gaze from my father to Abel. There was no panic or anxiousness in his eyes. In fact, I didn’t see an ounce of any emotion. They were just quiet and calm.

“I am a spy for the royal army. Right now, I am stationed out of Rimmel with the purpose of gathering information.”

“I can vouch for his identity. He used to work at my house,” Louis said.

Father looked at Louis with interest and then back at Abel. “I see... You worked for the Armelias.”

“Yes. My parents lived in a village where there was battle against Tveil. The village suffered great damage, and besides my parents, my entire family was killed. They had no one else to turn to, so they left, got married in the capital, and had me. My father died in an accident at work, and my mother passed away not long after from overwork. I was homeless and had nowhere to go, but one day, Lord Louis picked me up off the streets and gave me a place to work. I learned the art of espionage and joined the army. Since I have no living relatives, there’s no concern of anyone recognizing my face or knowing where I came from. Sometimes I go by different names, and I live in different places all the time.”

“Why did you join the army?” Father’s face clouded over for a moment. I wondered if he was blaming himself for not being able to help him.

“Why?”

“Your parents probably distrusted the army since they were unable to protect their village. Why would you want to serve your kingdom?”

For some reason Abel smiled. “It’s the opposite, in fact. It’s true that my parents lost all their relatives in the war. However, they would’ve died too if you hadn’t come to save them. You may not have been able to save everyone, but if you hadn’t come, more people would’ve perished. They were grateful toward you for saving their lives and their village. They spoke of you as a true hero and told me stories of how you fought to protect as many as you could. I’ve admired you all my life.”

“I see...” I knew Abel’s words wouldn’t be enough to lessen Father’s guilt. That was just the kind of person the man was. He’d suffered great losses, and he wouldn’t forget them. He held them all as his own burden. That was why he still looked upset, like he didn’t want to accept it.

“But at the same time...I felt badly that I had been so fortunate. There are many people who were in my same situation, but I had been lucky enough to be taken in by Lord Louis. Most people continued to suffer, so that’s why I joined the army. I didn’t want any other child to have to suffer as I did. No one else should have to know the pain of losing someone or be afraid to lose someone they loved.”

“I see...”

I was speechless. I could tell by the passion in his voice that he was telling the truth.

“During my mission in Rimmel, I could tell something was going on. I hate to admit it, but I raced here on horseback and traveled without rest or sleep... In fact, I got here so quickly, I beat the dukes here. I snuck into the party, found the suspicious people, and then ran into Lady Merellis.”

“So, Abel, who planned this?”

“Unfortunately, our enemies didn’t know who bankrolled them. I’m currently investigating how they were able to acquire army uniforms.”

“I see...” Father let out a deep sigh. I knew he wanted to know the answers right away, because the fact that they had so many uniforms meant there was a possibility whoever plotted this had ties to the army.

“Was anyone involved on Rimmel’s side?”

Abel looked troubled for a moment in response to Louis’s question. “I don’t have any solid evidence yet, but I believe it was Duke Sligar.”

“Wait...the Duke Sligar that’s here right now? He hired someone to kill *himself*?” I blurted out to no one in particular.

“I don’t want to limit our possibilities, but there are only two situations I can think of... The first is that if he was publicly seen being attacked at the same time as the other dukes, they wouldn’t suspect him. He probably had some kind of plan in place to rescue his family.”

“And the other?”

“That it wasn’t him masterminding the entire thing, but his eldest son, Cordis Sligar. He didn’t come to Tasmeria, in fact.”

“You mean he hired someone to kill his own father and brother?” Louis asked.

“This is all just conjecture, but it’s possible, right? It’s not as if it’s the first time someone plotted to kill their own relatives because of some goal they...” I trailed off. That was exactly right. After all, it had happened to me. It came to light that a relative had killed my mother. My father must have been thinking

the same thing because a heavy sadness filled the air.

“Please forgive me. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Louis apologized, realizing what we were thinking about.

“It’s fine. You’re right. We can’t exclude it from the realm of possibilities.”

Louis bowed his head. “Abel, I want you to investigate these two points. General Gazell, I’m sorry to ask, but...”

“Of course you have my full cooperation. I’ll use my resources to investigate the enemy’s identity.”

“I’ll do just that, Lord Louis. And thank you for your cooperation, General Gazell. I should be going now. If I stay any longer, it will look suspicious.”

“That’s true. Good luck, Abel.”

“Thank you, General Gazell.”

“Ah, I should be going too. I have plans after this,” I excused myself from Father’s study as Abel was leaving. “Thank you for today,” I said to him, truly meaning it. It was only natural that I had suspected him after meeting him in the palace under such circumstances, but now I realized I had put him into a tough position. He was a spy in the middle of a mission, after all.

“Not at all. And thank you again for your cooperation that day.” He seemed completely casual about the whole thing.

“Um, Abel? Can I ask you a question? What’s your real name?”

“Excuse me?” He stared at me, not expecting that.

It was so unusual to see him taken off guard that I had to laugh. “You said before that you change your name to go undercover. I was wondering, is Abel a fake name?”

“Ah... I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you my real name. The fewer people who know, the better.”

“I thought you might say that.” I sighed with disappointment.

“I have a favor to ask of you, actually.”

“What is it?”

“Right now, Lord Louis is probably already asking General Gazell for permission, but...I want Enarene.”

“What?” I knew that he had gotten quite close to the girls during their training, but I had never expected he’d ask to marry one of them.

“It’s not what you’re thinking. I want Enarene to work for me.”

“What? O-oh, you want her as a spy? I’m sure my father will tell Louis the same thing, but that’s up to her. If that’s what she wants, I won’t say no. I’ll go ask her. But what about Anna?”

“Honestly, I think Enarene is better suited for it. But if she wants Anna to come too, I won’t mind.”

“I see...”

If that were to happen, it would make their dreams of joining the army come true. But at the same time, it wasn’t exactly the job they were hoping for. They admired my father and wanted to be like him. Plus, being a spy was very dangerous. Of course, being a soldier was dangerous too. Because of all that, it had to be their own decision.

I called Enarene and Anna to my room and told them an offer had come for them to be spies for the army. I didn’t tell them who had asked to recruit them, just in case they said no. Enarene accepted without a second thought and was so thrilled that she decided to leave with Abel right away. Anna and Abel chatted together while Enarene was getting ready. I quietly watched over them, thinking how nice they looked together. I spotted Abel smiling softly at Anna, something that was quite rare for him. She had a pretty smile on her face too. I decided to excuse myself so that I could leave the two of them alone. I waited by myself in the parlor for a while, and then Abel entered the room.

“Abel?”

“Yes?”

“This might be none of my business, but are you engaged to anyone?”

He gave me a surprised look in response.

“I’m just curious.”

Abel smiled at me. Perhaps it *was* none of my business. “Unfortunately not. And I don’t think I will be either.”

“Why?”

“Because the fewer people who know about me, the better, due to my job. Also...I’ve decided to devote my life to the kingdom. What woman would want a man like that?”

I couldn’t answer, even though I wanted to ask why he was so willing to sacrifice his own happiness. I stopped myself though, knowing that was a line I shouldn’t cross. When Enarene and Anna returned, Abel and Enarene left the mansion together.

“Are you sure?” I asked Anna as we watched them go.

Surprisingly, Anna had said no to his offer and said she wanted to stay with me.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Are you sure you want to stay here?”

She smiled and said that she did. “Do you remember when you told me that you realized joining the army was just a means to an end but not actually your dream? I’ve realized the same thing for myself. I vowed to serve you, and that is my way of protecting the kingdom. I’m the only one who can do it. I want to devote my life to both you and General Gazell. You both saved my life, so I want to repay the two of you.”

Honestly, I wanted to ask, “*Are you sure you didn’t want to go be with Abel?*” But she was looking at me with such determination in her eyes that I couldn’t do it.

“If that’s what you want.”

“Thank you! By the way, Lady Merellis, we should be getting ready for your appointment!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s right. Let’s get started then, Anna.”

We went back inside to prepare for my meeting with Duke Grindel.

Chapter 12:

Separate Battles

“SO, NORT WAS CONNECTED to Cordis Sligar?”

“Yes. I looked into the merchants Cordis does business with regarding his medicinal herbs, and I discovered one of them was Nort. I’m sorry it took me so long to find the connection.” Alf told Romello solemnly.

“I wish I did not have to worry about it, but I suppose I understand. After all, you were investigating Curtis this whole time.”

“It’s true. I only began investigating Cordis because suspicions were raised due to the attempted attack during the party. I cannot thank Berne and Lady Merellis enough.”

“Do you know where Berne is right now?”

“Yes, we’re working together on our investigation. Berne is currently undercover in Nort’s company, which is doing business with Cordis.”

“Isn’t that sending him a bit too close to the fire? I don’t think he’d blow his cover, but what if they figure out he’s actually Abel from Tasmeria?”

“He knows the dangers, and that’s why he decided it was necessary to get the information as quickly as possible. This situation is serious.”

“I see...” Louis let out a sigh. He was very worried about Berne. He knew how important his mission was. The only reason why nothing ended up happening at the party was because Berne had managed to get that information beforehand. But the two of them had been together since childhood; the thought of him being alone in enemy territory filled him with great anxiety.

He shook his head as if trying to shake that anxiety away too. He was far away from Berne right now. He couldn’t let himself get carried away with his emotions. Louis had to do his part to ensure that Berne could carry out his mission, and that included keeping a calm head about him. He tried to switch his perspective.

“Anyway, back to the main point. So...we’re certain that it was actually Cordis who planned the attack on the dukes from Rimmel?” Romello had a sharp look on his face, the kind of expression he got when he was doing his job as the prime minister.

“Yes, it’s definite. Through Nort’s company, Cordis hired the men who came here to attack. He was the one who planned it and delivered the orders.” Alf seemed unbothered by the intensity of Romello’s gaze and answered in a calm tone of voice.

“I see. So that means Cordis was behind the incident with Baskar as well?”

“Yes, it seems that way.”

“Do you have proof?”

“We’re working on it.”

“What motive would Cordis have to do this? I realize that if he gets rid of both his father and brother, he’d be able to take over the family outright, but why would he involve his entire country in the plot and put their reputation in danger?” Louis asked.

“I’m not sure. He could get rid of all the other dukes in one fell swoop, so maybe he was trying to take over all of Rimmel? It would be easy for him if he had connections to someone with a common enemy of Tasmeria. That’s all I can think of at this point.” Romello heaved a deep sigh. It sounded louder than he intended in the study. The room was so quiet and there was such a heavy air inside that it almost felt like the room was cut off from the flow of time itself.

“Still, what’s clear is that he’s been planning this for a year, maybe two. That means he’s an extremely thorough person. We were extremely fortunate that Berne and Merellis were able to stave off the attack.”

“There’s one thing I must correct about that,” Alf said, his expression clouding over for the first time. “He has been planning this for much longer—perhaps four or five years.” He said the words carefully, as if sensing the weight of them.

“Four or five?! But why...” Romello asked aloud, then in the middle of his sentence, he stopped himself as he realized what Alf meant. His face hardened and his body froze. “Wait, you don’t mean the incident with Wels...?” He turned

so stiffly toward Alf that one might think him a marionette.

“Yes. I think it’s very highly possible that Nort and Cordis were pulling the strings behind it,” Alf’s voice was very strained, and his brow was furrowed. He had clearly expected this reaction.

“Wait a second! Are you sure about this?!” Louis was so shocked that he raised his voice unintentionally. It was no wonder—if this were true, then this would prove House Anderson had a connection to Rimmel. And even if Gazell hadn’t been aware of it, the fact that someone in his family, someone so closely related to him, had been behind such a plot would surely force the entire Anderson family to take responsibility for it.

“Yes, without a doubt. A spy I have near Nort overheard him talking about it. I’m sure he’ll uncover definitive proof soon.”

“Obviously I’m glad I heard this information, but at the same time, I wish I never heard it...” Romello murmured as he looked up at the ceiling.

Once again, a heavy silence fell on the room. Neither Romello nor Louis made eye contact. They were both lost in their own thoughts. Finally, Louis sighed and looked up. “I’m sure Alf’s spy will find proof sooner or later, especially if they’re embedded near Nort.”

“You sound awfully calm about this, considering it threatens your future wife’s family.”

“There’s no way I’m calm,” Louis responded, his voice trembling.

“I’m sorry. Alf, if you learned this much, surely you can find out where Wels has hidden the ore?”

“Yes. I found someone we can negotiate with, so I believe that will come into light quite soon.” Having someone to negotiate with would make the process of getting information go much more quickly, just like when they had investigated Count Talbot’s involvement with human trafficking.

“Then please continue, as quickly as you can.”

“Of course.”

“Wait!” Romello suddenly interjected. Louis gave him a questioning look. “I

want you to investigate the location of the ore from Nort's side. At the same time, I want you to check whether or not Wels or someone close to him is in direct contact with Nort."

"Father... Don't tell me you suspect General Gazell...?"

"We can't completely rule him out, right? Of course I don't *think* he was involved, and I want to believe that's true, but I can't rule him out because of my own personal feelings. The ones I'm truly suspecting are Wels's wife and child. His entire inner circle is suspicious."

Even though Gazell was his friend, he couldn't let that cloud his judgment. As long as there was a possibility of wrongdoing, he had to do his due diligence and keep investigating, just as he had told Gazell previously.

"At any rate, we need to separate Wels and Nort. You need to intercept all written communications between them and switch them out with false ones. Convince Wels that your spy is Nort's messenger. After that, follow through and give further instructions. Have the spy close to Nort destroy all communications they can find from Wels, and make sure Cordis doesn't have any of it saved. If he discovers any in Cordis's possession, have him destroy those too."

Alf bowed his head at Romello's orders and quickly excused himself from the room.

"Wels and Cordis are similar, aren't they?" Romello murmured once Alf left.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, their circumstances in life."

Louis inwardly agreed. Wels didn't have Gazell's talent with a sword, and Cordis didn't have Miles's constitution. Neither of them was accepted by their families, something that certainly must have made them sad and frustrated. They were probably incredibly sad and frustrated because their own blood relatives pushed them aside.

"They were both overcome by such hatred from not being accepted that they want to destroy their own worlds. I pity them, but that doesn't mean we should forgive them."

“That’s true. Compassion is one thing, but there’s also...”

“Letting your emotions get the best of you.”

“That’s right.”

Romello had hammered those points into Louis’s head since he was old enough to take over his father’s work. If you didn’t have compassion, people wouldn’t follow you. But at the same time, you mustn’t let your emotions get the best of you. If that happens, you make impulsive decisions instead of thoughtful ones. The end result is never the one you hope for, and the only one left with regrets is yourself.

“Are you going to tell Merellis?”

“Yes. After we clear Gazell’s name from any suspicion.”

“That’s kind of you. Or perhaps...it’s the opposite?” As Romello pointed out, Louis’s response could be seen both ways. If he told Merellis before they ruled out Gazell’s involvement, she would be burdened with a heavy secret. No matter how much she trusted her father, it would hurt her to know that he was suspected to be involved with this.

So, from that point of view, it could be seen as a compassionate choice that considered Merellis’s feelings.

On the other hand, if she found out he was being suspected, how could she not tell her father? And if he *was* involved, they couldn’t guarantee he wouldn’t move to conceal the truth. Even if he didn’t, Merellis would then have to wonder the entire time whether or not he would. So, in that respect, Louis’s choice had been tough, indeed.

“That’s an unfair question.” Louis spoke in a restrained voice, not betraying his true feelings. He didn’t answer his father directly. “Either way, you said the way Wels operates is very clever, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Alf had a very difficult time uncovering his connection with Count Luhmer, and he’s still having a tough time finding those ores he hid.”

“Perhaps he has been in contact with Cordis and Nort since then?”

“It’s possible. We’ll see what Alf’s investigation uncovers, but I think it’s quite

likely. After all, the men who were going to kill the dukes were wearing *our* military uniforms.”

“Then someone close to Wels must have used the Anderson family name to obtain the uniforms and then sent them to Nort.”

Both of the men paled at the suggestion.

“Sharing confidential information is enough to be counted as treason, but this would count as aiding and abetting an attempted attack.”

“That’s not all. It’s possible he used the ore belonging to House Anderson to forge the swords that would have been used in the dirty deed. Goodness!”

“Yes. If word got out, that could destroy the family. And in the worst-case scenario...the entire family could get the death penalty.”

Louis started trembling at Romello’s words, then hung his head.

His father continued. “And then you wouldn’t be able to marry Merellis, of course. There’s no way the future heir of Armelia would be allowed to marry someone from a treasonous family.”

“Father!” Louis raised his voice at Romello, which was very rare for him.

“Calm down. That’s only *if* it goes public.”

“I know. You’re not going to tell anyone, then?”

“We only have a cease-fire agreement with Tweil. The war isn’t officially over. I can’t allow the kingdom to lose their hero in such a situation. Now, all this is provided we find out that Gazell is innocent after all.”

Louis felt a shiver run down his spine when he noticed his father didn’t entirely answer his question. He let out a nervous chuckle. “Did you tell me this so that I could become your accomplice, then?”

All Romello could do was smile. Under normal circumstances, he would have to notify interested parties of this right away. But he couldn’t do that this time because House Armelia would face devastating consequences. “Normally, I’d just keep it to myself.”

“There’s no way you could. You’re already working too hard on the situation

with Rimmel. How could you do this on your own? Plus...” Louis stared into his father’s eyes. He noticed that there was no fear or panic in them. “I swore I would protect her, and I’m going to do that...even if that means it puts me on the opposite side of you.”

“I see. I feel like I just heard a very passionate confession of love. Anyway, jokes aside...until we have more information from Alf, we need to work on seeing what we can find out about how those men got ahold of our military uniforms.”

“That’s true. I can take care of that. You just concentrate on dealing with Rimmel.”

“I know.”

Louis excused himself from his father’s study and went back to his room to work alone.

“Hm? Are you looking for something, Louis?” A young bureaucrat called to Louis as the young man rifled through old papers in a study within the palace. Not many people frequented this room, which was mainly used to file away documents. There were only two or three other people here besides Louis.

“Pardon? A-ah, yes. There was a mistake in a document I filed, so I was just making sure I didn’t make the same mistake before...”

“You don’t have to look for that yourself, sir. I can do it for you.”

“No need. It’s not imperative right now. It’s just personally bothering me.”

“Oh? Well then, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course.”

Louis waited until the bureaucrat left and then resumed his search. He was skimming through every file related to the military’s budget. If he didn’t find the information he was looking for in a particular document, he’d put it back in the folder and pick up the next stack. He was devoting every free moment he had to this search in addition to doing most of Romello’s work.

The men who were plotting to kill the Rimmel dukes were wearing Tasmerian

army uniforms. If Nort had somehow bought these new, then there had to be a paper trail somewhere. And if there was, then that could lead him back to who was involved.

Of course, if they were wearing military uniforms that were used, there would be no record of that, and the trail would be harder to follow. New uniforms were needed in times of war, but since there was no fighting at the moment, it would probably be difficult for someone to get their hands on thirty brand new ones.

And if the buyer hadn't used the proper channels, there might not be a paper trail either. It was quite possible the enemy had used a different route to obtain the uniforms.

Louis suddenly paused, smiling to himself. In his hands sat an invoice for thirty military uniforms, dated before the dukes came to Rimmel. He took the document from the pile and left the room. He lost all track of time while he worked, and he didn't get back to the mansion until late that night.

Louis walked down the hallway and decided to stop by the library so that he could get some additional documents before returning to his room. This library wasn't as big as the one at the mansion back in the duchy, but it was still quite large, boasting many books and documents.

He walked inside and started to search for the book he was after.

And then he spotted someone on the floor.

"Mother? Mother!" he yelled. Aurelia had collapsed on the floor. He rushed over to her and picked her up in his arms. She was so light, much lighter than he remembered, and it filled him with fear.

"What is it...? What's all the commotion?" She regained consciousness as he held her, frowning at the noise.

"Commotion... Mother, you were lying on the floor, unconscious!"

"It's nothing to raise your voice about. It's not a big matter."

"I'll get the doctor right away!"

"I'll call someone over tomorrow. I just felt a little dizzy, that's all. There's

nothing to fret over.”

“But...”

Louis’s mother was so much thinner and frailer than he had realized. Her face was so pale there was no way he could calm down. But she refused his pleas for a doctor.



“Listen to me. I don’t want you making a commotion about this. Because if you do, Romello will find out. He’s in the midst of doing some very important things right now. He doesn’t have time to worry about me. I’m much too proud as the duchess of Armelia to interrupt him. And you have work to do too. Now, don’t worry about me, and you go rest. You have to get up early tomorrow, isn’t that right?”

She would not relent. She seemed very clearheaded. It was hard to believe she had been unconscious shortly before.

Aurelia and Louis stared at each other for a while.

“All right. But promise me you’ll have the doctor take a look at you tomorrow? I’ll send him to your room.” Louis said with a sigh.

“As I said, there’s no need for you to worry. But yes, I promise.” She took his hand and stood up.

“What are you doing here alone, anyway?” he asked.

“Everyone here is so concerned, and they won’t let me out of bed. But when I lie in bed all day, I can’t get to sleep at night. I snuck out and came here to the library.”

“Everyone is worried about you... Do others know about your condition too?”

Aurelia didn’t answer him right away. Finally, she let out a sigh. “Yes. I haven’t been well at all lately.”

“But why didn’t...”

“I forbid them from telling anyone else.”

“I know you don’t want to worry Father or me, but you’re my mother, and I love you. If anything ever happened to you, Father and I would be devastated!”

“You’re so sweet. But...yes, I’m sure Romello is worried about me...”

“Then...”

“This is what I want. If he knew what was going on, he would be worried sick that he couldn’t come be by my side. There are so many people who need him right now. He can’t spare the time worrying for me.”

“How do you know that, Mother?”

Neither Romello nor Louis had told her about the attempted murder of the Rimmel dukes, but it almost sounded as if she knew.

“I don’t know any details of what’s going on, of course...but I can tell that there’s something very serious afoot, just by watching you and your father.” She sounded so sure that Louis couldn’t help but let out a wry chuckle. “I gave my heart to Romello. That’s more than enough for me. But right now, there are people who need him, and it is my duty as duchess of Armelia to let him do his job.”

“I see. Then please, at the very least, promise me you won’t sneak out alone anymore.” Louis let out a sigh, sensing that his mother was not going to relent. He didn’t think his father would agree with this choice, but how could he say no to his mother when she was looking at him with such strong resolve in her eyes?

“You sound just like the servants,” she laughed.

“Of course I do. Everyone’s worried about you, Mother. So please just take better care of yourself.”

“Yes, all right... I’ll do that. Please forget what you saw tonight, however.”

Louis escorted his mother back to her room and stayed by her side until she got safely back in bed. He then returned to his own room.

“Wels’s daughter?”

“Yes. I examined the receipt for the military uniforms that Lord Louis found, and the trail led back to her.”

“That’s right, I forgot Wels even had a daughter...” Romello murmured, searching his memory.

“Yes. She’s twenty-two, older than Lord Louis. Her name is Salome, Salome Bella Anderson. Since Wels is still the head of household and under house arrest, she lives by herself.”

“All by herself? What about her other relatives?”

“Wels is estranged from his wife, and she has since left the mansion. Salome isn’t married yet either.”

“I see... I had a feeling it was someone close to him who bought those uniforms, but I suspected it was a subordinate. It was his daughter all along, eh? That’s surprising.”

“Why did you think it was a subordinate?”

“Even though Wels is under house arrest, he and Nort are still in communication. There are guards that watch every single person who comes and goes from that house, so it would be very difficult for someone on Nort’s side to sneak in. I figured that there must be an intermediary between the two of them. I assumed a subordinate would be more likely to do that than his daughter... So, what actually happened?” Romello asked Alf.

If Alf already knew who was responsible, he must have known more; or at least, that’s what Romello suspected. Alf had followed his orders to begin separating Nort and Wels, so his spy must already have the information.

“As you said, Wels and Nort are still connected. We confirmed that when my spy was working on cutting off contact between them. At that time, we discovered that one of Wels’s trusted employees named Ammos acted as the intermediary between him and Nort.”

“I see...”

“During the investigation, I thought something seemed strange. I realized that the acquisition of the military uniforms was actually quite sloppy compared to other cover-ups. What I mean by that is it was extremely simple to trace back the invoice to Salome. If he planned the attack after he was arrested, could he have secured those uniforms beforehand?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Louis answered Alf’s question. “The only reason the dignitaries came to Tasmeria was because of Father’s negotiations. It was all decided directly in person. Regardless of if it was Nort’s or Cordis’s idea to get the uniforms, they wouldn’t have been able to get them in advance.”

“I see. It does make sense that there would’ve been no way for them to do that.”

“Yes. I believe Salome must’ve somehow discovered Wels’s link to Nort and went rogue, or perhaps Nort contacted her directly. I don’t see how it could have been possible otherwise. Either way, Alf’s right—the cover-up was sloppy, so that means it’s very likely Salome went rogue. Anyway, how are the efforts to cut contact between Nort and Wels?”

“They don’t regularly send letters to each other as it’s only occurred a few times, but things are proceeding smoothly. We’ve confirmed where the letter exchanges take place. You can check those reports when you have time.”

“All right.”

“It will be in the report for you to read later, but we have secured a letter proving that General Gazell has no involvement. I’ve also received information from several other spies embedded there confirming this.”

“And what about the ore?”

“We’ve confirmed its current location. A portion of it was funneled to Duke Sligar’s domain in Rimmel...”

“I figured as much. There’s nothing to be done about it now, though. Have you gotten any definitive evidence from Nort’s or Cordis’s sides proving that Wels was involved?”

“They’re working on it. It’s a difficult thing to prove, but they’re taking the steps to do so. Berne is taking care of it, so please don’t worry.”

“I’m very confident we’ll come out victorious knowing that you and Berne are working on this together. Please continue with your efforts to cut Nort and Wels off from each other and collect additional evidence. And make sure not to leave behind any proof on Wels’s side about the attack. We also need to ensure that no reinforcements are coming from Nort and Cordis. The thing to fear most right now is another attack. If Wels makes a move, that would mean Cordis wasn’t far behind, and an attack on Rimmel right now would be disastrous.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now that we’ve cleared the general of suspicion, we can go ahead and share the information with him. We’ll have him and the Anderson House guard take care of the matter of the ore.”

“Isn’t that the job of the army?” Alf asked.

Romello frowned slightly. “If we involve the army, word will get out. Now, I’m not familiar with fighting, but if for some reason the guard isn’t able to take care of it, we’ll have to figure out how we can mobilize the troops. Honestly, I don’t want it to come to that, though.”

“I see... And how do you want to deal with Cordis?”

“We should leave matters involving Rimmel for Rimmel to take care of. But honestly...I’m torn on the matter. Although we can see they cooperated with each other, it doesn’t necessarily mean they worked completely hand in hand. Since they’re so far away from each other, there would be a delay in message delivery. And with that delay, it would be very difficult to work in sync. Even if something were to happen in our country, it’s not clear if we have the right to deal with it.”

“So in other words, the problem is *who* has the authority to deal with the issue. But, ultimately, Rimmel should deal with their own problems. We’re out to protect two different things, and because of that, we can’t hand over the right to command. Even if they seem willing to cooperate, we might not have time for that. And if something happens when we’re negotiating, we could lose the initiative and be unable to force the issue forward. Worse comes to worst, if they all moved independently, there’s a chance we could be defeated.”

“Ah, I see...”

“So, there’s no need to force them to cooperate? If the situation would worsen if they all act independently, we should avoid that. But on the other hand, it’ll damage their trust in us if we take care of the situation without notifying them at all... What if we share the information with Duke Grindel while still taking care of things on our end?”

“Yes, that’s probably the best course of action. But how should we deal with Cordis? It’ll be hard to make that decision and carry it out on our own.”

Silence once again fell on the room. Both Romello and Louis seemed lost in their own thoughts as Alf watched on. For the first time, the butler noticed both father and son had dark circles under their eyes that they could not conceal. They must have been working tirelessly while he was away; their clothes looked

rumpled, which was highly unusual for them, and they both looked a little thin.

Alf wasn't sure how much time had passed before Romello finally broke the silence.

"I can only think of one thing to do." The prime minister spoke quietly, but the sound was enough to echo through the room. "Alf. You can get in contact with Berne, can't you?"

"Yes, of course."

Romello turned toward Alf to look at him directly. His gaze was both serious and filled with great resolve. "In that case, I want you to give him the orders to eliminate Curtis and Cordis and install Miles as the next Duke of Sligar. The prime minister of Tasmeria, Romello Gib Armelia, will take all responsibility for the fallout. And, if necessary, I shall put my private seal on the orders."

Alf stared at his master. It was highly unusual for him to not immediately acquiesce. Romello didn't seem uncomfortable to be watched with such a testing gaze and just took it quietly.

"I think perhaps Curtis has a comparable number of guards to you, my lord. Taking that into account, surely you can understand that it would be exceedingly hard to eliminate either him or Cordis."

"Yes, I know, but you and Berne are the only ones I know who are capable of doing it. I'll give you all the personnel and money you need to get it done. I'll take full responsibility for whatever happens, no matter what the result. Is there anything else you need to confirm about the order?"

"No, I think that's all," Alf laughed. The sound of it was so good-natured it would surely ease anyone's heart.

"All right." Romello nodded, the serious look returning to his face.

"Berne and I shall get to work. I'll also continue the efforts to cut off communication between Wels and Cordis, of course. I'll leave my work here to trusted subordinates."

"Very well. Take care."

"Thank you. I can arrange for anything I need myself, but I shall contact you if

something else arises.”

“All right. Louis?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll do everything I can to support him.”

“Thank you, Lord Louis.”

And so Alf departed for Rimmel.

Chapter 13:

The Future Duchess Learns the Truth

A WEEK PASSED without incident after the dukes from Rimmel returned home. Well, it would be more accurate to say nothing happened *publicly* during that week, but something was certainly happening behind the scenes.

After the guests from Rimmel left, things began to calm down once more in Tasmeria, and all the students who had taken a break for the occasion returned to the academy.

I put down my bags and headed to the cafeteria since it was almost time to eat breakfast. It wasn't required that we eat breakfast in the cafeteria, so there was only a smattering of other students there. I didn't have to wait for a seat, and a staff member brought my food to me right away.

I was just about to start eating when Sharia sat down across from me.

"Good morning," she said to me.

"Oh, good morning!" I set down my fork and knife and looked at her closely.

"Your dress at the party was just gorgeous. And it was so fascinating how you completely changed how it looked halfway through the party; I couldn't believe it was the same dress! Only you could pull off something like that, Merellis."

"Oh, that's sweet of you. I was worried it might be too much, so I was surprised it was so well received."

"Really?" Sharia's eyes were wide.

"Mind if I ask you something too?" I said just as Sharia's food arrived. I picked up my knife and fork and began eating after we offered up a prayer, blessing our food. I took one bite and then set my fork back down.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Why were you dancing with him at the party?"

She froze for a moment. I didn't specify who I was talking about, but I meant

my question to be vague on purpose. Sharia knew exactly who I meant, right away. It was quite adorable how she couldn't hide her flustered response.

"Well...he invited me to," she said in a quiet voice, her cheeks flushed.

All I could do was sigh. Since when had the two of them gotten so close? Now, I wasn't sure if she was aware of how she looked when she spoke of him or not, but...my friend looked quite pleased. And that was why I couldn't just overlook it—it would be difficult for this love of hers to work out, and even if it did, all that would be waiting for her was hardship. Even though I knew that, I also knew I wouldn't be able to stop it. That was because I knew Sharia's disposition...but mostly, it was because I also knew what it was like to be in love.

Before Louis and I became engaged, I was so overwhelmed by my love for him that it was painful. When things didn't go how I'd hoped at first, it hurt. The thought of not being able to be with him was devastating. Thinking back on it now, I knew how difficult it would have been to stop loving him.

"This might be a selfish request, but please...don't bottle it up inside. Please don't suffer all alone," I said quietly.

Sharia smiled at me. It was a beautiful, bright smile. "Thank you, Merellis."

Once we finished eating, we left the cafeteria and headed toward the school building. It had been a while since we'd been in class, and they hadn't advanced in the curriculum much since so many of us had taken time off. To make up for it, the teacher taught today's class at a much quicker pace than usual.

After class, instead of going back to the dormitory, I quietly sat in an empty classroom and watched out the window as the knights had their training.

"Is that interesting?" All of a sudden, I felt someone come in the room. I let out a sigh of relief when I realized it was Sharia.

"Yes, it is. Sometimes they move in a way that surprises me. It's a good learning experience."

"Does Lord Louis know you're still interested in training...?"

"He understands. He wants me to be myself, so he's fine with it."

“That’s wonderful,” she said after a pause. I was sure it wasn’t my imagination that her voice sounded quiet.

“Why are you attracted to him?” I asked.

“Attracted...”

“Are you not? That’s what it looks like to me.”

Sharia let out a little sigh and then smiled. “Do I need a reason?”

“Hm?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just wondering if people *need* a reason to be in love.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re right. I suppose any reason you would give would just be hindsight anyway. By the time you realize you love someone, it usually already happened!”

“That’s right. I thought for sure I wouldn’t fall for him. In fact, I was worried that people would think I was after him since I’m not engaged yet... I was trying to be very careful of that since you mentioned it before.” She giggled softly. “But after we spoke about it, sometimes he and I had the occasion to talk to each other. And the more time I spent with him, the more I realized I enjoyed it. I know it’s presumptuous of me, but I began thinking—well, hoping—that perhaps I could give him support if I were the one by his side. Can you imagine it? He’s going to have an incredibly big responsibility someday. And it didn’t take long for me to realize that those things I felt for him were actually love.”

“Have you confided in anyone else besides me about this?”

“Of course not. No one else is as familiar with the palace’s inner workings as you, anyway. But I am the daughter of a count, after all. I consider myself fairly knowledgeable. And...I know that my feelings will just cause problems for him.” A dark expression clouded her face, but it then changed into a serious one. She was so beautiful that I could understand how *anyone* would fall in love with her. Sharia then continued speaking. “So that’s why it’s okay. I’m satisfied with the way things are. It may not be pretty, but at least now I’ve experienced what love feels like, and for that, I’m grateful.”

I truly admired her strength of character. If I was in her position, I would

lament about it to whoever would listen, and I would definitely cause a lot of people trouble. But on the other hand, the way she spoke about this didn't seem like her. Normally, Sharia would keep going, even if she thought something would be difficult. Even if that meant she might regret it. She would say things could change—and that there was nothing that couldn't change. So why was she so hesitant this time? She was afraid of moving forward and was trying to compromise on her feelings.

But I couldn't say a word about it, because it would be irresponsible to. After all, the object of her affection was a *prince*. She couldn't just tell him her feelings lightly. And even if she did and the response was favorable, there would be much hardship ahead for her. Supporting her in this wasn't easy.

"No matter what you choose to do, you're my precious friend. And I'll protect you with everything I have," I said.

"Goodness! Ha ha. I have the strongest protector in the world then! You know, if you were a man, high society would be turned upside down! You'd have just as many girls fawning over you as the prince! Maybe even more!"

"He he he. I don't know about that. At any rate, as long as you're you, I'll protect you. That's the decision I've made, and I don't want you to forget it."

"I won't. Thank you, Merellis." Sharia's eyes glittered with emotion. She showed me a beautiful smile.

Two weeks had passed since that conversation, and I hadn't met with Louis at all in that time. In fact, I hadn't even seen him at school. He'd been very busy, going back and forth between the palace and the Armelia manor. I just hoped he was getting enough rest, although I imagined he had forgotten all about sleep and was completely immersing himself in his work.

I was sitting in the library today. When exams were coming up, this place was always packed, but on this occasion, it was deserted. This was particularly clear in the section where they had nonfiction books; not a soul was around. I heard the faint sound of rain falling outside, so I paused my search and looked out the window. The sky was overcast, and it was a little dark even though it wasn't that late yet. The gloomy mood outside seemed to be reflecting my inner one,

making me feel even more down.

We had successfully averted a plot to kill the dukes from Rimmel, and they had safely returned home...so why did I feel this way? The ending of it all hadn't left me feeling relieved because I didn't know how they had gotten the military uniforms or who had plotted the attack. Also, deep inside, I was bothered by the looming change in power structure of the Tasmerian nobles.

The outcome of Sharia's love would have an effect on it too.

The country was like a piece of fabric. Every citizen was like a strand of thread, woven together in a complex way that revealed a pattern. I personally thought some threads had been woven in when they shouldn't have been, so several tangles had been made. I knew we'd have to unravel it to fix it, but the knots were so tight. How could we untangle it if we couldn't even distinguish the individual threads? Meanwhile, the machine just kept on spinning, weaving the knotted threads together, nonetheless.

Perhaps I was feeling anxious because I knew we needed to untangle the mess, but I just didn't know how.

"Oh, hello, Your Highness." Amidst my reveries, I sensed a presence and saw a head of familiar golden hair. It was Prince Edgar. I couldn't exactly ignore him, so I greeted him politely with a curtsy.

"I haven't seen you in a while, Merellis."

"That's true. We didn't have the chance to speak at the last party at the palace."

"Ah, I suppose that's right."

I meant it as a little dig, but he responded normally, even though I was certain he knew what I meant.

"Do you come here often, Your Highness?"

"Yes. When I'm not studying government, I always come here." He started perusing a nearby bookshelf. I turned my own attention back on the bookshelves, resuming my search.

"Your Highness... Please pardon my rudeness, but may I tell you something?" I

asked, my gaze still fixed on the bookshelf. Under normal circumstances, I knew how inappropriate it would be and I wouldn't do such a thing, but he didn't seem to mind.

"It's all right. What is it?"

"I just wanted to let you know that *she* is very important to me," I said, emphasizing the reference to Sharia.

I saw his body jerk with surprise for a split second.

"I don't pretend to know how you feel, Your Highness, but if you intend on playing with fire, please don't get any sparks near her. However, if you're serious..." I glanced over at him finally. He was still staring at the bookshelves, but his hands were not moving. Instead, he had his arms crossed, and he was quietly listening to me. "Please, whatever you do—don't hurt her. As I'm sure you are well aware, the environment in the castle right now is not favorable. It might cause you to let go of her. If your feelings are such that you could let go of her that easily, then please just do it right now."

"And if I have no intention of doing so?"

"It's not my place to say. All I can do is stand by and watch over her, protecting her from afar."

"I see..." Prince Edgar stood there quietly. Even though I had been incredibly rude to a member of the royal family, he didn't seem angry at all. "You two are very close, aren't you?"

To be honest, I was surprised at his reaction. "Y-yes, we are. She's very precious to me."

"And that's why, hm?" He murmured to himself. "Ah, it's nothing. I'm just surprised you gave me your opinion because you care so much about your friend..."

Honestly, I couldn't tell whether he was exasperated, or angry, or what. His expression was completely impassive. Nevertheless, I didn't regret what I had said, and I kept watching him quietly.



“I’m not the kind of person who would find fault with someone who genuinely cares for their friend,” he said. “It’s just interesting to me, that’s all.”

I tried to say, “*I see*,” but the words died in my throat. I stayed silent instead.

It seemed that he had no intention of discussing the matter further, because the conversation ended there. He resumed browsing the shelves.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness.”

“Of course.”

I just happened to find the book I was searching for at that moment, so I took it and left the room.

Meanwhile, at the Anderson manor, Gazell’s study was filled with tension.

“I see... So it was Wels...”

Romello had just finished telling Gazell everything. The general hung his head, a dejected look on his face.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let the army get involved in this. I can have them on standby in case something bad happens, of course, but if this turns into a war, it’s going to be more than just Wels’s problem,” Romello told his old friend.

“Even though we said we’d give up our lives for the kingdom? Otherwise, how is it logical?”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Yes. I can’t face my soldiers again after this. How can I be the general and act like nothing ever happened when I think of those who have given their lives fighting for this kingdom?”

“I understand what you’re saying, Father. But first we must focus on the battle at hand,” Pax cut in. “It’s best to try to avoid deploying the army before the situation gets any bigger, because that will give Tweil an opportunity to strike. Plus, if they find out that there’s internal strife within House Anderson, there’s no telling when they could attack. If it gets to that point, we’d have no choice but to mobilize the soldiers that are in the capital. Then, people will find

out what's going on if we move too many of them. That's why I think the most ideal outcome here would be to take care of it using just the Anderson guard."

Gazell looked over at his son and nodded. "You're right, Pax. We'll take care of it on our own. Since it was someone from House Anderson who started this mess, it should be House Anderson who cleans it up. Romello, Louis, you know where the ore is?"

"Y-yes, of course." Romello said.

Gazell looked over at his son. "Pax."

"All right. Lord Romello, Lord Louis, would you share that information with me? I'd also like to discuss the matter of supplies with you," said Pax.

"S-sure. Louis. You go with him."

"Yes, Father." Louis and Pax left the room together.

"Gazell?"

"What?"

"I'm sure I can guess the answer, but I'm going to ask you anyway. What will you do about Merellis?"

"What do you mean? Will I have her participate in the operation? Do you want to call off the engagement?" Gazell asked. He turned a gaze on Romello that was cold but not angry. Romello was angry enough for the both of them.

"Don't be ridiculous! That's not what Louis wants. He's working to make sure he *doesn't* lose her!"

Gazell let out a sigh of relief. "You sure have a good son. But regarding whether or not I'll allow her to participate, of course I won't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. She's my precious daughter. I can't let her. And she belongs to House Armelia now. If she participates, the sparks will spread to the Armelias, won't it?"

"Well..."

"I can't ask her to do that."

“...All right.” Romello didn’t press his friend any further. Gazell could tell that the topic was now closed.

“Still, are you sure you have time to be here? And Louis?”

“What do you mean?”

“Time, I’m talking about time! Pax is long-winded. He’s probably already starting to suggest plan after plan to Louis after hearing what we had to say. Who knows how long it’ll be till they finish talking?”

“Then I’ll go on home. Let Louis stay here, would you? I don’t know when else they’ll have the time to decide things. This is their chance.”

“All right. Thanks.”

And so Romello left Louis in the care of House Anderson and went on home.

Meanwhile, Louis didn’t emerge from Pax’s study for three days. Pax, Louis, and two members of the guard were inside the study the entire time. The four of them used Louis’s intel to formulate a plan to move forward. From time to time, maids would bring them food and take away dirty dishes, but otherwise, the men remained inside the room.

Finally, as the third day was drawing to a close, a haggard-looking Louis, Pax, and the two guards emerged and went to Gazell’s study.

“Did you come up with something good?”

“Yes. Father, this is our plan. Please read over it and let me know if you have any questions.”

“All right... Good work, everyone. I’m sorry you had to stay for so long to do this, Lord Louis. Please rest up here and return to your home tomorrow.”

“Thank you for the kind offer, but there’s no need. My home is close, so I can return there. Please forgive me for excusing myself so abruptly.” Louis turned down Gazell’s offer and excused himself from the room. The general knew he had a lot of work to do since he had taken over Romello’s responsibilities, so he didn’t try to stop the young man.

“Think he’s going to go straight to work when he gets home?” Gazell muttered absently as he watched Louis’ carriage depart.

“Perhaps,” Pax answered as he watched by his side.

“He sure works hard. I could learn a thing or two from him. Although I’m getting too old to work as much as he does now,” remarked Gazell.

“I can learn a lot from him too.” Pax moved away from the window and took a seat on the sofa.

“Pax?”

“Yes?”

“I know what Romello and Lord Louis said, but I still think that I need to atone for this incident.”

“Since I am the heir, then I should have to as well, by that logic.”

“No, but you...”

“Why should I be the only one unscathed in this matter?” Pax’s voice was completely calm yet firm and without hesitation. His eyes were filled with resolve.

“No...you’re right. This is the end for House Anderson. Let’s go into this battle with the mindset of it being our last.” He had a faint smile on his face. It was the kind of smile that could only be described with a word he never used—fleeting.

“What will you do about Merellis?” Pax asked his father.

“She belongs to House Armelia now,” he replied. “I want her to live there happily. That’s enough for me.”

“I agree...” Pax nodded, a similar, fleeting smile on his own face.

Two days later, Romello gathered up all the guards who were training on the grounds.

“Attention!” Gallia, the commander of the house guard, called out when Romello arrived. All the guards immediately stood at attention. Gazell stood in front of them, inspecting them.

“You are the fangs of House Anderson,” the general started. “The pride of House Anderson. Your sacred duty is not just to protect my life but to obey my commands and annihilate any enemies that threaten to do House Anderson

harm.”

The air crackled with tension. No one dared to speak a word. Even the guards who stood in the very back of the line could hear the general clearly, as if there were no others standing between him and them.

Even the sound of them swallowing nervously sounded loud in the silence.

“And now, we have discovered our enemy is Wels. The man I used to call my little brother.” Gazell looked down for a moment. The guard could feel his hesitation, bewildering them. “However...” he murmured, and once he looked up, all traces of reservation had vanished from his face. “Don’t hesitate! Do not be afraid! I will not hesitate. I will not falter. Let us cut down every enemy who stands in our path! Strike fear into the hearts of those who dare cross us! You are the fangs of House Anderson! Bite into our enemies and follow me! Join with me and let us destroy our enemies together!”

His passion was enough to wipe away any fragment of uncertainty the soldiers had. Everyone present was pulled into his intensity, and his words stoked the fires of their fighting spirits.

“Onward!” The guard raised their swords to the sky.

And so Gazell took the first step forward to fight his own brother in a final, fateful battle.

Two weeks had passed since the day I talked to Prince Edgar in the library, and I still hadn’t seen Louis. It felt like ages since the last time we had met. It wasn’t as if this was the first time we’d gone this long without seeing each other, but for some reason, I felt very down and depressed over it. I tried putting my energy into my training, hoping it would make me feel better.

I was all alone, the only sound that of my sword swinging through the air. Once I was finished, I got ready in my room and headed toward class.

“Huh?” On the way there, I saw Louis. He must’ve spotted me as he was gradually making his way toward me.

“Hello, Louis. How have you been?” Since there were other students in the

corridor, I had to speak as politely as I could.

“Merellis. Could I talk to you?” We had just a little time before class, but the anxious look in his eyes and deadly serious expression on his face was one I couldn’t refuse.

“Y-yes, of course.”

He took me by the hand and led me to the school gates.

“W-wait, where are we going?” I asked as he urged me into a waiting carriage.

“We found out who was behind it all.”

“The attack on the Rimmel dukes? Or the attack on Tasmeria?”

“Both.”

“Well, that’s good. Who was it?”

“I’ll tell you more details when we arrive at the Armelia manor. We can’t let anyone else hear this.”

“O-okay...” A heavy mood filled the carriage as it continued on. The moment we got to the Armelia manor, he showed me to one of the studies. Curiously, Romello was not there.

“Take a seat. This is going to be a long story.”

I did as he said and sat down in one of the chairs. “So? Who plotted to kill the dukes of Rimmel? And who cooperated with them?”

“The eldest son of Duke Sligar, Cordis Sligar. He plotted the whole thing.”

“Cordis Sligar? The one who didn’t attend the party, correct?”

“I’ll tell you everything, starting from the beginning. Just listen.” Louis began to explain everything he and Romello had discovered to me. Romello had gone to see all of the dukes and to negotiate with them after learning of Count Talbot’s betrayal.

“Ah, so that’s why Lord Romello went to Rimmel?”

“Yes.”

Louis continued and said that while Romello was there attending to the

business with the dukes, Louis had taken over back home and was looking further into the matter with House Anderson. He also discovered the location of the ores Uncle Wels had diverted.

“So it was my uncle who diverted the ore... Don’t tell me he was using them to make weapons?”

“He was.”

I suddenly felt weak at Louis’s admission. My uncle was amassing a great deal of weapons in secret—and that could only mean he was planning one thing.

“And that has to do...with the story you’re telling me right now?” I had to laugh nervously in the middle of my sentence.

Louis frowned for a moment at my reaction. “Yes. Cordis Sligar was orchestrating everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything. He was the one who sent the merchant that encouraged Duke Baskar to get involved in human trafficking. He was also the one who planned to murder the dukes of Rimmel while they were in Tasmeria. Wels conspired with him, but Cordis was behind everything.”

“I see... So a portion of the ore went to Rimmel. Does that mean the remaining ore is still in the possession of House Anderson?”

“Yes, that’s right. I know where it’s hidden too.”

“In other words, my uncle is trying to overthrow the head of House Anderson—no, not just that—he’s trying to usurp the Tasmerian throne in cooperation with Rimmel... Is that right?” I asked, and Louis nodded without hesitation.

“Does my father know about this?”

“Yes, my father told General Gazell previously.”

“I see... Knowing my father, I’m sure he’s going to try to deal with his relative’s shameful actions himself.”

I had a feeling he would try to act on his own, without utilizing the army—even if that meant he would be outnumbered. In fact, he probably decided to mobilize the guard the moment he found out he would be at a disadvantage.

“I’m sorry, Louis.” I stood up and embraced him. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me back.

“For what, Merry?”

Even if my father was outnumbered, I knew he wouldn’t seek outside help. And I could not abandon him either. House Anderson’s name and reputation were on the line here, even if Father was able to drive back my uncle and his faction. Since I was going to be Louis’s wife, and the future duchess of House Armelia, what I was about to do was not proper of me.

“I’m going back to the march. Father needs all the help he can get.”

“No.” Louis refused, startling me. “General Gazell has already made his move.”

I froze. “When did Lord Romello tell my father about this, Louis?”

“Two weeks ago,” he responded after a pause.

“That long ago?! Why didn’t you come and tell me then?”

“General Gazell told us not to. He said he didn’t want to involve you since you were going to be married into House Armelia.”

“He just wants me to watch from afar when House Anderson is in trouble? While people who are important to me go off to battle, without me? Why would he do this...?” I asked, hanging my head.

Deep down, I knew why Father had done it. He didn’t want me to have to pay for the sins of the Anderson family. He knew it would pain me, though. Of course it would.

I shed tears of frustration. I was too late. People who were precious to me were fighting at that very moment, and I had just been carrying on with my life as normal, not knowing a thing. It was a very kind thought from my father and brother to leave me out of it, but I cursed myself for my own powerlessness while everyone else was working hard. But most of all, I was worried about them.

Louis reached over and gently touched my cheek. I let him wipe away my tears, and then I looked up at him. “Why did you tell me this now?” I asked. He

looked down. “Did...something happen?”

I stared at him. At first, he wouldn’t make eye contact with me, but he eventually let out a little sigh and met my gaze.

“Nort has made his move.”

“In cooperation with my uncle?”

“No, if he’d done that, he would’ve sprang into action a while ago. And even if he were, it would be too late for us to do anything. But General Gazell is already attacking Wels. It would be too late to save him. According to the information I received from Abel, I think that Nort has gone rogue.”

“Gone rogue...”

“Yes. It seems as if Cordis grew suspicious of our actions to cut off communications between Nort and Wels, and he tried to cut Nort out of the plan. As a result, Nort made his own move. He’s using Sligar’s personal guard and marching troops toward Tasmeria, pretending it’s under Curtis’s orders. They’re working with his mercenaries that he assembled in secret. Together, his forces are enough to form a proper army.”

“And Father is spending all of his energy in the march attacking my uncle... Where’s my brother?”

“After I let him know about the ore, he helped me formulate a plan to control the flow information. Right now, he’s leading the overall command from the back while General Gazell fights on the front lines.”

Suddenly, I understood why Louis was telling me all this now. The fewer people from outside House Anderson to get involved with this fight, the better. But most of all, we could not let the army march toward Rimmel. The moment we did would be the start of a war.

And that was why Father and Louis had made the decisions they had. They wouldn’t send the army to Rimmel. They would send *me*.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said, even though I was actually afraid myself. I was sure we’d win...we *had* to. The fate of House Anderson depended on it. But even if I survived, even if we won—who could say if I would be able to return to Louis?

House Anderson's reputation might fall with Wels.

And if that happened, I couldn't return to Louis. I would be nothing but an obstacle to him. No matter how much I wished, no matter how much I loved him...that would be a wall we could not overcome. And that frightened me more than I could say.

"I promise I'll survive and come home to my future husband. You're the only place I could come home to." I was terrified, but that's why I had to say it out loud. Saying it to Louis was the same thing as telling it to myself. I would not let anyone else have him. He was mine. This was my home.

"Of course you will. I'll never let you go." He must've sensed how I was feeling as he said that to me.

"Louis..."

"I can't go with you physically, but my heart will be with you. I'll share the burden which you cannot bear alone. I'll protect you for any obstacles in your path. So go, and let me take care of the rest."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"You're lying..."

"Why would I?" he replied. "If there's a burden you need to shoulder, then we'll do it together. If there is an obstacle blocking your path, I'll use my power to remove it. If walls stand in the way of us being together, I'll destroy them. But in exchange, you will be mine and belong only to me."

I embraced him again. My heart felt so full that tears flowed down my cheeks. I felt so grateful that I loved him, and that he loved me in return.

"Don't give up," he told me. "Don't give up on coming home to me...or walking this path together with me."

I tightened my grip around him, to feel his presence. So that I wouldn't forget this feeling in my heart.

"I'll be back," I said with a smile, and then I bade him farewell.

Chapter 14:

The Future Duchess Stands on the Battlefield

AFTER I SAID my goodbye to Louis, I made my way toward the Anderson manor in the capital. The guard was already there, assembled on the training grounds. I quickly went into the house, changed into Mer's clothes, and headed for the training grounds. I went up to the podium and looked out over the crowd. Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—the men here were ones I had trained with for as long as I could remember. In other words, I knew every single face in the crowd.

“You all know me as Mer. But my real name is Merellis Reiser Anderson. I am the daughter of General Gazell, the marquis of Anderson.”

I was acutely aware of the shock that went through the crowd. I had to chuckle inwardly at their response.

“I'm sure you've already heard from my brother Pax, but we found out Rimmel is raising an army. We are the only ones who can stop them. Our pride and the name of House Anderson are at stake.”

The entire area went quiet. The only sound in the field was that of my voice. “It will be a tough battle. A hard battle. Many of you won't make it back home alive, I'm sure... And if you want to run away now because you value your lives, I won't blame you.” I closed my eyes and mouth for a few moments, waiting. Waiting for someone to move.

We could not involve the country's army in this matter. We were already at a disadvantage because we were outnumbered, and Nort's side had a territorial advantage. I wouldn't blame the guard for choosing to run away at this point. However, I knew I'd be in even more trouble if they ran after we'd gotten to a certain point.

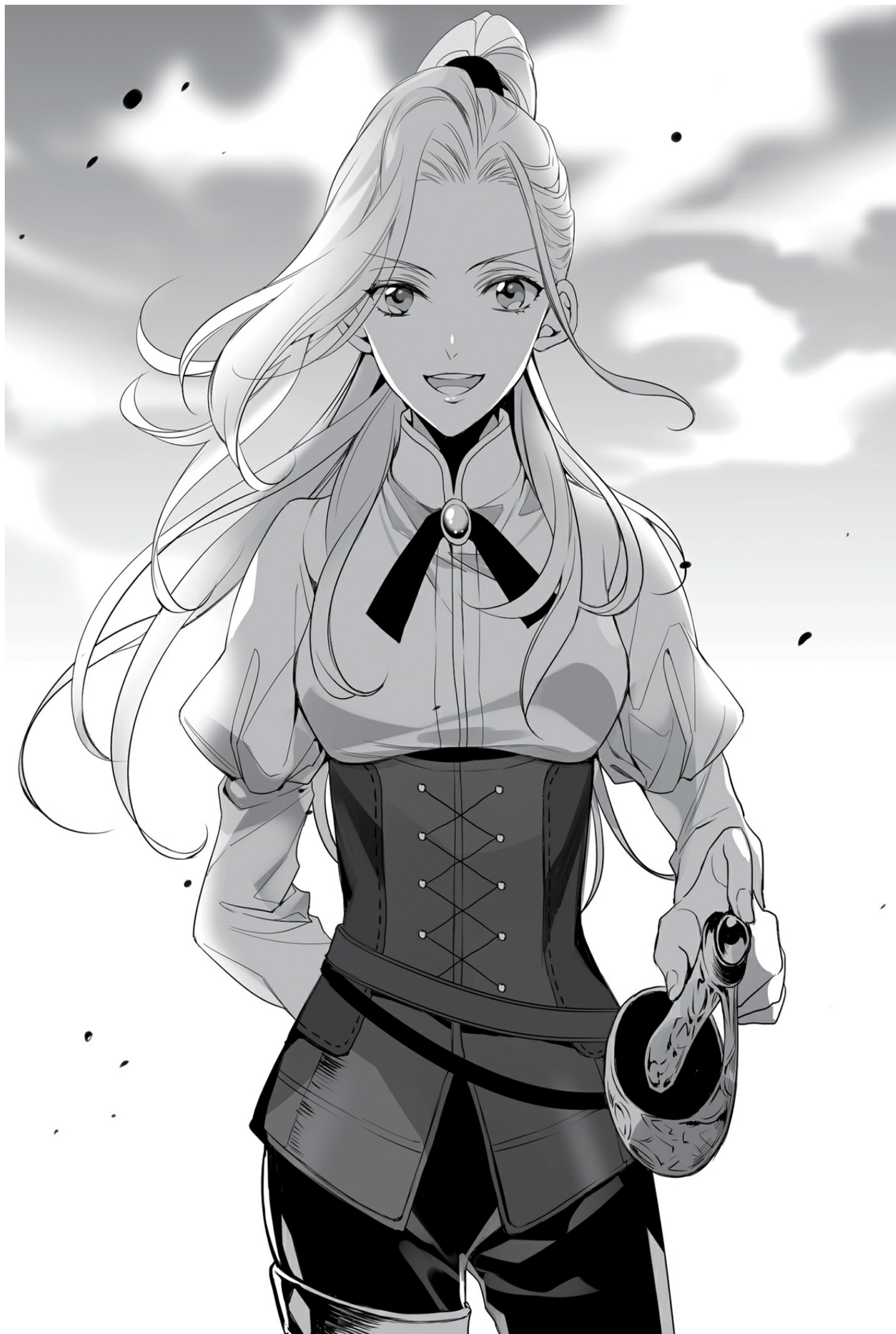
I stood there silently, but no matter how long I waited, no one moved. I lifted my face and opened my eyes. Everyone was still there before me. “You've shown me your resolve. You have all been trained personally by General Gazell.

Sharpen your blades. Don't turn around. Keep charging forward. Honor your names and keep running as long as your heart still beats! Keep running forward and follow me!" I could feel the tension in the air.

The members of the guard looked even more serious than before.

"Aye!" They all cried in unison, lifting up their swords.

"Thank you..." I told them quietly.



I mounted my horse and immediately led the guard away from the capital. I followed the road my brother had indicated we take. Under normal circumstances, I would need special permission to march these many soldiers across the borders. That was because of a custom put in place to avoid needless wars between domain lords. However, we already had gotten special permission to take the guard across the border and back and forth to the march.

Many domains sat between Rimmel and the capital, so I thought it would be equally difficult to cross the border there. I wondered just how we had gotten permission from so many domain lords, but we had.

We took as few breaks as we could and rushed toward Rimmel as fast as possible. We took our final rest right before we crossed the border. We were traveling on a trail in a forest that was a short distance away from the main road so we didn't attract attention. I remembered how I stopped in areas like this when I chased after my brother that time when I was younger and let out an inward chuckle.

"Shrey. The map, please," I said, quickly switching gears.

"Here it is."

I spread out the paper, and we looked at it together. "Just to confirm, the enemy is using this route to travel south, yes? So that means Pax and Louis were correct?"

"Yes. Do you have doubts about it?"

"Thanks to everyone's cooperation, we got here faster than my brother and Louis thought we would. I think we have a good chance of meeting the enemy within Rimmel's lands."

"I agree. Under normal circumstances, we'd wait here to ambush them, but we might be a day or two ahead of them."

"Or they might be ahead of us... Do you think it's safe to say Pax and Louis thought they'd be here sooner than they actually are?"

"I do," Shrey agreed. I closed my eyes and thought for a moment. I tried to

figure out if my hunch was possible, based on the roads and the speed at which we'd traveled. Of course I trusted in my brother's and Louis' plan, but we had gotten here so quickly we had quite a lot of time on our hands.

"Are you sure the enemy has all their troops together, and that they're all moving as one?"

"Yes. We sent a horse ahead to make sure. They're moving at the speed we expected."

Another messenger raced up to me and said the same thing. That settled it for me. I tapped a spot on the map.

"There?" Shrey asked.

"Yes. We're going to go here before the enemy arrives. Do we have a scout? I want information on their formation before they get here."

"Yes, over there."

"Good. Once we're done here, dispatch them immediately. I want everyone to get ready."

"Yes, my lady!"

I watched everyone move according to my orders and then followed the guide. After I got done speaking with the scout, I immersed myself in thoughts again, picturing the enemy's formation and deciding upon a battle plan.

"Lady Merellis?" I heard a familiar voice, and it pulled me back to reality.

"Yes, Anna?" She had accompanied me here as my attendant. I didn't have time to argue with her, so I had just let her come along. After all, she had trained with the guard long enough to call herself a member.

"I've received word that we're ready to depart."

I closed my eyes again, feeling the weight of my decision and my responsibility. "All right. I expected nothing less from everyone. Let's go."

"Yes, my lady."

We got back on our horses and off we went, in the direction of the battlefield.

We had secretly traveled from Tasmeria to Rimmel. A long, narrow road stretched out before us, and it was sandwiched by high cliffs on both sides. As we stood there, I tried to calm my racing heart.

“We’re here,” I said in a quiet voice. I could hear hoofbeats gradually approaching us from in the distance.

I felt the tension rising among the guards behind me. I swallowed hard.

“Our prey has arrived, everyone,” I started. I could hear everyone else gulping too. “I hate fighting. I hate taking lives. But that’s why we can’t allow these people to win, because they’ll do the same to us.” As I spoke, the enemy kept coming closer, but I kept on talking. “Now, everyone, let’s strike fear in their hearts. Let them tremble at the very sound of the Anderson name, frightening them so much they do not dare to make enemies of us again. Kill them! Destroy them! Annihilate any enemy who raises their swords to you! Onward!”

I could feel the guard’s enthusiasm rising as they waited behind me. This was precisely the mood I wanted them to have. Because when the enemy came into sight...I saw that they had us vastly outnumbered.

I grabbed the reins and urged my horse forward. For a moment, the enemy seemed frightened by our sudden appearance, but once they saw how few of us there were, they charged forward without hesitation. I raised my hand just before they reached us, and arrows rained down upon them. The arrows were heading right toward our enemies, trying to take their lives. Our attackers didn’t even have enough time to be surprised. The arrows just kept flying by, and each time they landed, my vision was filled with a shower of crimson.

“Lady Merellis!” Anna happily cried my name as she waited behind me. I couldn’t blame her—the plan had worked, after all. But...why didn’t I feel happy? I had watched things work out as planned, feeling something very close to relief. Finally, the enemy began to retreat in an attempt to regroup. Once again, I raised my hand, and then I charged forward on horseback.

The barrage of arrows stopped immediately. My horse leapt over piles of dead enemies, chasing after the ones who were still alive and fleeing. I reached the first one and killed him in an instant. The guard followed close behind me. My men shooting arrows from atop the cliffs climbed down and joined us. They

raised their swords one after the other and cut down our enemies. *Kill as many as you can. I want to get rid of as many of them as possible in preparation for the battles ahead.* That's what I had told the guard before this fight. They faithfully obeyed, taking out the enemies who were left on the field. Everything was stained in crimson. The metallic tang of blood stung my nostrils.

The enemy could no longer fight here, and their survivors retreated. As soon as they disappeared from the narrow road, I heard the guards cheer behind me. We had won the first battle. I breathed a sigh of relief as I dismounted from my horse. The guard's members had looks of joy on their faces as they cheered. I simply raised my hand in response.

Meanwhile...

Gazell was engaged in a battle at the Anderson march against the mercenaries. Pax had plotted a strategy from the information he'd received from Alf, and Gazell had gone along with a small number of the Anderson guard to carry it out.

They moved swiftly so as not to be discovered, striking down each mercenary as they found them.

"Almost there?"

"Yes. The next one is the last."

"Let's hurry up."

At this time, Gazell knew that Nort had made a move in Rimmel, and that was why he was so anxious. He brought everyone to the final ambush location, which was a certain building within the march. He stationed guards at the entrance and exit, and then charged in himself. He ran through the building, clearing room after room. He opened the door to the final room and found ten men inside.

"There, that's Nort!" Alf's subordinate pointed to one of the men.

"What?" Gazell was baffled; the information he had received beforehand said that Nort was in Rimmel, raising up troops. However, Alf's man had dealt with

Nort directly, so he wouldn't mistake someone else for him. If that was the case, who was back in Rimmel, raising the troops?

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. I am indeed called Nort."

Since he went ahead and introduced himself, Gazell figured it must've been true.

"I see. So you're the one behind all this?" Gazell muttered. He then attacked Nort, and the other man dodged him at the last second and pulled back. Meanwhile, the guards killed the remaining nine men.

"W-wait, let's talk about this!" cried Nort.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"There's a lot you don't know! If I tell you, will you let me go?"

"Who in their right mind would let you go? You just want an excuse to talk." Gazell mercilessly swung his sword. Nort wasn't able to dodge this time, and the man's sword was knocked out of his hand. Gazell slashed him so that he couldn't run away. It was a serious wound, just deep enough that it could be healed...or not.

"What do you have to say?" Gazell knelt down in front of Nort, his sword dripping with the man's blood. His eyes were unusually cold—cold enough to make a man tremble with fear. Even his own guardsmen behind him silently broke out in a cold sweat at the sight. "If I were you, I'd start talking, for your own sake." Gazell glared at him again.

Nort's body shook as he opened his mouth to speak. "How... How long do you think I've been in cahoots with Lord Cordis?"

"Hrm. Since Wels started diverting the ores, no?" Gazell answered.

Nort laughed. "Of course not. We joined forces much earlier than that. Ever since the war against Tweil ended."

"What...?"

"Lord Cordis hired me to present Tweil with weapons. Unfortunately, someone saw me do it. Your wife. She saw me handing over the weapons."

“Merelda...?”

“That’s right. We sent weapons to Tweil thinking they would win the war. We never expected them to lose. But after they did, we didn’t want our connection to be exposed, so we withdrew. However, I just couldn’t find the girl who had witnessed me. I searched and searched, and imagine my surprise when I discovered she was your wife...”

What he hadn’t realized was that the kingdom officially changed her parentage right after the Tweil war. They didn’t want anyone knowing she was the daughter of Count Ceyzan, so she was adopted by a baron. She lived a quiet life so no one would discover the truth, staying away from social gatherings as much as possible and devoting her life to raising Pax and Merellis.

“I only realized it when I saw her at a party once. I spent an entire year investigating her...and then I found out about Wels’s secret little ambition. Thanks to him, I didn’t have to dirty my own hands. I’m quite grateful to him, in fact. Oh yes, that little tidbit helped me negotiate.”

“I see. So you didn’t harm Merelda directly.” Gazell spoke so quietly no one could hear him. “But you *were* the one who put Wels up to it, and I can’t overlook that.”

And with that, Gazell killed Nort.

“Pax!” Gazell called.

“Yes, Father?”

“If Nort’s here, that means someone else is commanding the troops in Rimmel! Take the guard there to Merellis at once!” he barked.

“Yes, Father!”

Gazell looked back down at Nort’s body. “Were you just used by Cordis, or...? Well, either way, you picked a fight with us. That’s all,” he muttered and then left the building.

We had earned our first shiny gold star of victory on the battlefield in Rimmel, and now we sat waiting for the enemy again.

Even though we'd claimed a win in the first battle, we hadn't completely eliminated our enemies. I hoped they wouldn't come back, and I wished this could just be the end of it. But no matter how much I wanted that, I knew it wouldn't work out that way. The plan was I had to deal with things here in my father's place since he couldn't leave the kingdom, not until my brother finished dealing with my uncle Wels and arrived here as my backup.

If the enemy made a move before my brother arrived, it would put us in an overwhelmingly unfavorable position. Even so, we knew we couldn't retreat, because if we did, the enemy would easily be able to continue on and invade Tasmeria.

That was why we kept waiting here. We had to buy time before my brother showed up, to keep watch and keep them in check. Camping outside night after night was rough, but we were able to survive thanks to the supplies that Louis had sent along. Even though we came here very swiftly ourselves, I couldn't believe how fast Louis had gotten all this to us. My fiancé was such a dependable, amazing person. I was reminded of that even more as I looked down at the supplies.

"Lady Merellis!"

I had a feeling about what was happening by the panicked tone in Anna's voice, but I fought to maintain my composure. "What is it?"

"A message from our scout. The enemy has regrouped and has started to move again."

I let out an inward sigh. I'd been afraid of this, and now it had actually happened.

"What about the relief squad from my brother?"

"Nothing yet..."

"I see... Fetch me a map, please."

Someone else brought a map and briefed me on the situation at the same time—they explained the enemies' numbers, their current location, and their projected route. As I listened, I visualized it all in my head. Since my brother hadn't arrived, our best bet would be to either charge or to ambush them. We

wouldn't be able to use that narrow road again with the cliffs because the enemy would be cautious of that path due to the last battle. The scout said they were currently taking a route through a wide-open plain. We didn't have enough time to lay a trap there. *What should we do? Isn't there anything we can do?*

We were outnumbered, but surely there had to be some way for us to drive them back. We could *not* let them get to Tasmeria. If they did, the Tasmerian government and the royal army would get involved. How would that affect our relationship with Rimmel? We were currently in a cease-fire with Tweil, but would they break it and make a move? What would happen to the peace my father had worked so hard to obtain?

"You all fought well. Much better than anyone would expect from a domain's guard."

I just couldn't think of anything that would do anything except buy time, but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. To tell them they needed to retreat. My voice was trembling. *Just hurry up and do it. Tell them to get away from here.*

"If we retreat, the enemy will reach Tasmeria. Right?" Shrey said before I could say anything else. "We can't allow dishonor to fall upon our master's name. And we can't afford to go to war with either Rimmel or Tweil. There's only one path for us to follow, my lady."

"I can't tell you to march to your deaths."

"And yet you have no intention of retreating yourself, no?" He asked sharply. I couldn't say anything in response. He continued. "I see only one choice. We stay with you until the end." He got down on one knee and bowed his head to me. One after another, the other members of the guard followed suit.

My heart hurt. Their loyalty made me so happy, but at the same time, I cursed myself for allowing them to come down this road with me.

"I'll allow it," I said. "Stay with me until the end, then."

"It would be our pleasure."

I closed my eyes for a moment so I wouldn't shed tears in front of them. Crying could wait until everything was over.

“Once we get home alive, we’re going to book Madame Caluis’s place for a private party!”

Everyone cheered.

“That sounds good! Kreuz is gonna get a lot of attention!”

“M-maybe I’ll finally get up the courage to confess to Lurulia!”

Everyone laughed and started teasing each other. I could tell they were all just pretending to be in high spirits, but of course no one would admit it. No matter how cheerful they sounded right now, we all knew that wouldn’t change our situation.

We spent the night in that strange mood, pretending that everything was fine.

When the scout returned the next morning, the mood was quiet and serious. The men were all calm, with a strong resolve in their eyes. The chilly morning seemed suitable for the quiet tension that ran through the air.

“Good morning, Lady Merellis.” Shrey finished getting ready and went to greet her.

“Good morning, Shrey.” Ever since Merellis had left the capital, she’d had a tense sharpness about her, but today, she seemed eerily calm.

“Let’s do our best today.”

Merellis chuckled softly in response. “A casual greeting for such an important day. But yes, let’s.” She turned on her heel and went to talk to the rest of the guards. It seemed like she wanted to cherish her conversations with each one of them, imprinting them upon her memory.

“I’m honored to fight with you all,” she said with a small smile as they all gathered around. Her smile vanished the next moment. “Follow me, everyone.” That was all she said, as if to say there was no reason to be anxious. Strangely, those simple words were enough to make the warrior spirits of the guard quietly burn anew.

They mounted their horses and followed behind her, heading to the plains

where the enemy would arrive. Shrey and Merellis hid in the glen to one side of the field. They waited there quietly, unmoving, until the right moment.

They heard the sound of the wind rustling the leaves and the grass. The smell of fresh green tickled their nostrils, calming their hearts. Finally, they heard the distant drumming of hoofbeats that were gradually coming their way. A wave of tension spread through the captains as they hid.

And then, Merellis opened her eyes. Without saying a word, she got back on her horse and quietly charged forward. Shrey and the other members of the guard followed after her. Even though their forces were vastly outnumbered by the enemy, there was no fear in anyone's eyes. An image of Merellis, powerfully charging forward, was reflected in their gazes.

Before the enemy could react to them charging from the glen, Merellis used her sword to cut a path through them, swiftly and quietly. She took enemies' lives with a ferocious intensity. Every time her sword slashed through the air, the field was filled with the scent of fresh blood and was covered in crimson splatters beneath her feet.

She slowly, slowly made her way to the center of the enemies, eventually all the way to their commander. Seeing her back as she charged into battle, sitting tall and strong, gave her men confidence. Although she was a dear comrade, the sight of her slicing through enemies and taking lives so swiftly was somewhat frightening to them. She almost looked like a goddess of death. But at the same time, the Anderson guard was mesmerized by her. No matter what the odds looked like, there was no option for them to stop.

As her forces gradually got closer, more guards were injured. Some collapsed. Even yet, the group did not stop. They trusted Merellis and kept charging toward the enemy commander. More than a few of their number had lost their lives by the time the remaining guard had the commander surrounded.

"A-a woman?" a thin man in the center murmured with surprise when he saw Merellis leading the fight.

"You are the commander, are you not? Your blood will become no more than rust on my sword!" Merellis said as she charged at him.

"Lord Cordis! Run away!" The commander's guards tried to stand in between

him and Merellis.

“Get out of my way!” She cut the men down one by one and kept making her way toward the man.

“Ahh... Ahhh!” She looked to be death incarnate, and his knees buckled at the sight as she finally approached.

She mercilessly ran him through with her sword, and the man slowly fell from his horse. The thud of his body hitting the ground echoed throughout the plains.

“Wh-why?!” The man laid in a pool of his own blood as he screamed. Although he wasn’t as loud as other noises from the battle, everyone heard it.

The combatants stopped in their tracks.

Merellis looked calmly down at Lord Cordis, her eyes ice-cold. “Why what?”

“Why? Why, when I finally almost had it...?!” Blood sprayed from his mouth as he spoke. It was plain to see that it was too late for him. “How could it slip from my hands, when I finally came this far? Why could I never get the things I truly wanted...?” He reached a trembling hand out, but it was not in the direction of Tasmeria, as one would expect. Instead, he reached toward the north, toward the duchy of Sligar. “My father never had one good thing to say about me. I just wanted him...to be proud...” His voice became faint and delirious, and his eyes grew vacant. He no longer saw anything, but he reached out with trembling hands, nonetheless.

The captain of the guard thought Lord Cordis looked like a lost little child—like a young boy never loved or accepted by his father. All the warm feelings the man had wanted went to his younger brother instead. He grew up without knowing what it was like to be loved and forgot that it even existed.

Every Tasmerian, including Merellis, stood there on the battlefield watching, and had no idea when things went wrong for him. Perhaps he had hated everything. Perhaps he thought if he could never get the affection he wanted, he might as well destroy everything.

Merellis quietly stared at the betrayed man. Meanwhile, the first of Cordis’s injured bodyguards rose up and charged at her. She didn’t even blink as she

whirled around and stabbed the man. But while she did this, another man rose up and charged at her from behind.

“Lady Merellis, watch out!” Anna was the first one to notice the attack. She slid between the bodyguard’s sword and Merellis at the very last minute... taking the blow through her body instead.

“No! Anna!!!” Merellis screamed, stopping time for everyone for a moment. “Anna! Anna?!” She called the young woman’s name over and over again through her tears. The wound was obviously fatal, and she was slipping away, fast.

“Lady Merellis, let’s go!” Shrey quickly swept Anna up into his arms and galloped away on his horse. Another captain picked up Cordis and slung him over his own steed. Even though the enemy’s commander had fallen, his forces still had them surrounded. The more time they spent here, the more dangerous it would become.

Merellis realized she was being left behind. She quickly climbed up onto her own horse and sped away. The guard took off in a straight line through the enemy, running their horses as fast as they could. Despite the force at which they ran, Merellis seemed to have lost her luster. The guard, too, were all battered and bruised.

Don’t move! Please don’t move! The guard silently chanted that within their minds. It would be much too hard to take on the enemy now that their numbers were even fewer. That was why Merellis had decided to charge from the side and the front in the first place. Her idea had led them to a hard-fought success, and they had killed the enemy commander.

But they hadn’t killed all of them. The brute force attack had worked, but there was no telling if they could make it out of the enemy’s territory alive.

Knowing this, the enemy suddenly pulled the trigger. Even though they lacked a commander now, the enemy forces began charging at the line of Merellis and her men.

“Argh!” The captains were approaching their limits. They were almost overcome by the waves of people, but everyone frantically swung their swords to protect Merellis, who rode in the lead. They were determined not to give up.

Where are they? When will the others get here? Has no one heard from our reinforcements?

They all fought through their impatience, swinging their blades as they followed behind Shrey and Merellis, hoping against hope.

One after another, men sank into the crimson sea.

The reality of the situation weighed on the guard so heavily it was stifling.

Then, it happened.

A strange feeling ran through the enemy troops, and they started to flee. The guard began to wonder what had happened, but they couldn't allow themselves to get distracted. Merellis's men kept focusing on running through the enemy lines.

When they had just barely made it through, Merellis realized what happened.

"Brother!" she yelled.

The reinforcements they'd been hoping for had finally arrived. Pax, the heir to House Anderson and Merellis's brother, calmly and mercilessly led his troops through the enemy lines, cutting them down one by one. They were strong even without a commander, but Pax led his troops so efficiently it didn't take long for them to lay waste to them.

"You can relax now," Merellis said quietly as they reached the edge of the plains. Despite being so quiet, everyone heard her. Their breaths caught in their throats. "That's right. Just you hang on. I promise I'll save you."

Anna slightly opened her eyes in response to Merellis.

"Anna!" she screamed, taking her hand.

"Lady Merellis... I was the luckiest girl in the world to serve you. Thank...you..." Anna stared vacantly up at Merellis...and smiled.

"No, Anna! Don't talk like that! You're making it sound like this is goodbye... No! No, please!!! Don't give up on the future!" Tears flowed from Merellis's eyes and fell onto Anna's cheeks. The droplets made it look like they were Anna's own tears.

“A life for...a life. I am giving mine to save yours, Lady Merellis. I’m so happy...I was able to...help you in the end. I only wish I could...be around to see you grow... And to see the peaceful future...you’ll build...”

“Stop! Anna! Don’t say these are your last moments. Please, don’t say that! You’ve helped me so many times! I need you to stay with me, Anna!!!”

Anna’s eyes widened slightly with surprise, then softened as tears shined in them, and she smiled. “Thank you. Please forgive my rudeness, leaving first... Give Abel and Enarene...my regards...”

“Anna...? Anna!!!” Merellis frantically yelled Anna’s name, trying to clutch onto her life force. She screamed it over and over again.

However, Anna could no longer respond. Instead, the young woman quietly fell into an eternal sleep from which she would never wake, a peaceful look on her face.

“Oh, Anna...” Tears streamed down Merellis’s face.

A painful silence loomed over the place.

“There you are, Merellis.” Pax suddenly appeared with several guards, breaking the silence at last.

“Brother...”

“Is Anna...?”

“Yes. And not just her. Many of our precious comrades gave their lives... As soon as your troops are done fighting, we must go get them.” The vitality had disappeared from Merellis’s eyes as she stared back at the battlefield. A deep sadness enveloped her.

“I’m sorry... You dealt with a very tough battle.” A pained expression crossed Pax’s face.

“This is the decision that I made. There’s no reason for you to feel responsible, Brother. I’m just ashamed of my own powerlessness.” Merellis unsteadily rose to her feet. “I defeated Cordis, but I couldn’t find the merchant. We should start searching for him at once.”

“Nort was hiding in the march. Father already took care of him.”

“Nort took over the operation without knowing what was going on with the Sligars... Is that why Cordis went rogue?” Merellis asked.

A captain of the guard dragged Cordis’s body over to show Pax, and the young man’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

“But that’s impossible...” Pax started. “Abel and his men were supposed to be watching over Cordis!”

“Abel?”

“Yes. Abel was working undercover inside the Cordis household. His responsibility was to keep watch over Curtis and Cordis. I wonder if Miles discovered Lord Romello’s plot and sprang into action instead?”

“It’s possible. If the operation at the Sligar manor succeeded and Cordis was removed from his position as heir, his actions today would make sense. Did you receive any clues from Abel that Cordis was going to be involved with this battle?”

Merellis was doing her best to suppress her emotions and remain calm. Pax and everyone else watched her with aching hearts.

“No, I didn’t.”

Merellis suddenly jumped on her horse.

“What is it, Merellis?”

“Something’s bothering me, and I have to go check it out,” she said.

“Wait!” Pax frantically tried to stop her. “Let us take care of this. You need to rest!”

“No, I can’t! Anna’s last wish was that I give her regards to Abel and Enarene. I need him to come back home to Tasmeria safely! He must be in such a dire situation that he couldn’t send the information about Cordis... That means he’s in trouble! I know you can’t leave here, so I must!” Merellis refused to listen to Pax and spurred on her horse.

While everyone was stunned as they watched Merellis go, Shrey came back to himself and jumped on his own horse, starting to follow. “I’ll go with her!”

Merellis showed no signs of fatigue as she raced north toward the Sligar manor. The sun was beginning to set, and a reddish-orange light spread throughout the sky from the west. As they neared the town, Merellis's mood became cold and sharp. Shrey could sense as much even as he followed behind her. The closer they came to the town, the more impatient and frantic the mood in the air became. It seemed like something had happened in town. The two of them silently surveyed the scene, watching to see what was going on.

Finally, the sun fell beneath the horizon, and everything grew dark.

As darkness fell, the feeling in the air changed completely.

"Something's coming," Merellis said quietly, showing a slight reaction.

"What? Lady Merellis...?"

They heard a small noise, and suddenly, Alf and Abel appeared from the shadows. Abel had been severely wounded, and Alf was dragging him along.

"Alf, this way! Shrey, you help Abel!"

"Yes, my lady!"

Merellis stood in front of them protectively. She drew her sword and turned toward the other sounds she heard. Even though they were covered in darkness, she could still perfectly read her enemies' movements, and she cut them down one by one. Alf skillfully backed her up without getting in her way.

"I think that's all of them..." Merellis shook the blood from her blade when she no longer heard anyone else coming. "Are you two all right?"

"Th-thank you, Lady Merellis..." Abel said just as he collapsed.

"H-hey?!" She reached out and grabbed him as he fell. Thick, warm blood stained her hands. The metallic scent of it hung in the air. Seeing blood on her hands again so soon after what she had just gone through with Anna was too much for her. Her entire body began to tremble at the sight. "Abel...? Abel!!!"

"Please move, Lady Merellis." Shrey ripped some fabric from his clothes and tried to perform first aid on Abel, but it was too dark for him to see what he was doing.

"Alf! Get a light! Shrey, get the first aid kit!" Merellis barked out orders, but

Abel reached up with a bloody hand to stop her.

“I’m...sorry. Made a mistake earlier... Alf somehow got me here...”

“Don’t talk. You’ll be fine! We’ll patch up your wounds and you’ll be fine!”

“We can’t use light... The rest will see us... Please... Leave me here...and go.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We can’t do that!”

“Here...” Abel took a bundle of papers from his pocket and handed them to Merellis. They were spotted with blood.

“These...”

The papers contained proof of the connection between Wels and Cordis. Other letters showing Cordis was connected with other nobles were included in the bundle as well.

“Show no mercy to those who tried...to overthrow House Anderson. Tell General Gazell. We need him...to protect the kingdom. Because of him, the knights and the army finally work...together. Because of Gazell...Tweil will not rise against us. Other kingdoms too. Tasmeria...can’t lose him... So, take...”

Merellis hesitantly took the letters.

“I’m sure General Gazell and Lord Pax... They won’t take this easily. Tell them... Don’t let my death...be in vain.” Straining himself to talk so much, blood gushed from his mouth.

“Tell them yourself! Tell them not to let your efforts to have been in vain!”

“I know my body better than anyone else...” Abel gave her a confident smile, so much so it was hard to believe he was a man on the verge of death.

“Why? Why...?” She asked with frustration.

“I don’t take my life...lightly. I have so many...” He paused, choking. “Many things left to live for, but I can’t...” He coughed painfully. Blood splattered and flowed everywhere. When the fit finished, he began to wheeze. “But I can entrust...this kingdom...to capable hands. I can die...peaceful...”

He must have already lost his sense of sight because he couldn’t make eye contact with Merellis any longer. The flame of his life was about to burn out.

She grabbed his hand. “You can’t just say that! It’s too heavy. That’s not something I can just promise!” She smiled at him through her tears. “But...I will. I will vow to myself to protect this kingdom’s peace.”

“That’s...reassuring.” He smiled. His pale face twisted with pain, but even so, the corners of his mouth tugged up weakly.

“And...Anna’s waiting for you. She told me to give you her regards, but...I think she can tell you herself now.”

Abel’s eyes widened with shock, but he slowly smiled again. “Ah... I’ll...let her. Thank you...Lady Mer...ellis. And Lord Louis...”

Then, he quietly closed his eyes. As he did, Merellis doubled over, quietly sobbing.

Rain began to slowly fall from the sky like tears. The droplets gradually picked up their pace until there was a proper rain falling down over them. The cold drops pounded upon the group, almost as if to wash away the blood from the ground...and reflecting the young woman’s sadness.

Shrey and Alf had been silently watching over Merellis as she mourned her friend. She wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but eventually, she quietly stood up.

“Let’s go. Shrey, take Alf on your horse. I’ll... I’ll take Abel.”

“We’re taking him with us?” Alf looked surprised.

Merellis stared at him blankly. “Yes. I want to bury him in his own kingdom.”

“But if there are more enemies and we have him with us...” He let the rest unspoken—his body would just get in the way and weigh them down.

“Then I will simply kill them all.” She had said that so calmly with a beautiful expression on her face that Shrey and Alf felt cold sweat run down their backs. The young woman’s smile was so full of malice that they found it hard to breathe. All the two men could hear was their hearts pounding hard in their ears.

“And that’s why I’m going to take him with us. I won’t hear any arguments about it. Let’s go.” The tense atmosphere dissipated as she started to move.



Shrey and Alf let out relieved sighs.

“Come on.”

The three got on their horses and rode back toward the battlefield. Just as Alf had suspected, enemies came after them. But as Merellis vowed, she defeated all of them, viciously and swiftly, before Alf or Shrey had any time to lift their blades.

After all the enemies in Rimmel had been annihilated, we joined up with my brother and his regiment and returned to Tasmeria. I entrusted Abel’s body to Alf. We held a quiet funeral in the capital for Anna and the guards who lost their lives, and I went back to the march.

Even though the incident had not been made public, the air in the Anderson march was somewhat tense.

“Welcome home, Merellis.”

“Thank you, Father. I just got back.” As soon as I entered the mansion, Father welcomed me, looking a little tired.

“You did well.”

I sat down in front of him and had some tea. “What happened with Uncle Wels and Salome?” I asked.

“Wels... I took care of him in battle. Salome is still alive, but she will be poisoned tomorrow.”

“I see...”

“Would you like to see her one last time?”

“No. There’s no reason for it.” I didn’t even remember Salome very much. I was sure she didn’t want to spend her last moments talking to me anyway.

“She said she was jealous of you,” Father said.

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing. I hadn’t been expecting to hear something like that, and it sounded utterly amusing to me. “Me? Why would she be jealous of me?”

I knew that I led a privileged life, having grown up as the marquis of Anderson's daughter, but that didn't mean that I had been happy my whole life. I had plenty of bitter experiences, and I had to work very hard for the future that was expected of me. People who claimed they were jealous of me had no idea what I'd gone through. I supposed it was easy for people to see my life like that though, so there wasn't really anything I could do about it.

"She was jealous you were my daughter, and that you're engaged to the heir of Armelia."

"I figured as such. It doesn't matter. What will you do when everything's taken care of, Father?"

"Hm? O-oh, well..." he trailed off vaguely and averted his gaze.

"Here." I handed Father the bundle of papers Abel gave me. At first, he gazed at them with disinterest, but when he finally realized what they were, he started on the bundle. He read them from beginning to end, a serious expression on his face.

"Where did you get these from? Abel...?"

"Yes. He wanted me to give you a message. He said, 'Please don't let my death be in vain.'"

The moment I told my father that, tears fell from his eyes. "This is all my fault. Wels's rebellion, the fight with Rimmel... So many lives lost. Abel and Anna's sacrifices. The guards... All of that is my fault, and I can't even take responsibility for it?!"

I had a feeling he would react this way. I wondered if he and my brother had intended on taking full responsibility for it all, thereby bringing down our entire family and choosing death.

I slammed my fist down on his desk to get his attention. He looked at me, startled, his eyes open wide.

"The best way you can take responsibility is by living. Live for the future! You and Pax should carry on! Don't you think the only true way you can shoulder the responsibility for this is to live? Dying is running away. It's blasphemous toward those who gave their lives!"

“Merry...”

“Abel prayed that you would be Tasmeria’s anchor, Father. That *you* would bring the knights and the army together, and you’d continue protecting the kingdom from Tweil and Rimmel. He said you’re the only person who can do it. Please, Father. Please grant his, and Anna’s, and everyone’s dying wishes,” I pleaded.

He stood there, looking stunned. At long last, he closed his eyes and bit his lip, quietly weeping before me. This was the first time I had seen him cry since my mother had died. I couldn’t help but cry at the sight myself. It was just that heartbreaking to see him like this.

“I only ask this one thing of you, Father.”

“Abel’s cruel. Everyone is. Their wishes are too great to shoulder. There’s so much pressure, I fear it will crush me.”

“No, Father.” I smiled at him. “*You* don’t have to shoulder their wishes. You, Brother, Louis, and I...we all wish for the same thing. We all made the same vow to ourselves. And as long as we don’t turn our backs on that vow, we will be granting their final wishes, together.”

Father chuckled softly. “I see,” he murmured.

After the funeral for the guardsmen who gave their lives in the battle, I returned to the capital.

“Welcome home, Lady Merellis.”

“Enarene!” Honestly, it shook me to see Enarene, who looked so much like the friend I’d lost, but I wasn’t the only one in pain. She must be hurting much more than I could ever imagine; after all, they’d been together since birth. And that was why I couldn’t ignore the fact that it was my fault—I hadn’t been able to protect her, and I would have to bear the guilt of that forever.

“I feel like it’s been a very long time since you were last here.”

“The same goes for you, my lady.”

“I suppose you’re right.” I returned to my room, and Enarene followed me.

“Lady Merellis... What do you think about a new attendant?” she surprised me with that question as soon as I sat down.

“Are you talking about yourself?”

“No...but I think Anna would be concerned.”

“I’m sorry.” A heavy silence filled the air. “I have no intention of hiring on a new attendant.”

“So then...”

“Honestly, I can take care of myself. I can just borrow help for big events like balls and such. Anna was the only attendant I ever hired on for myself.”

Enarene’s face twisted with agony. It looked like she was trying not to drown in her pain. She looked like the young woman held so much sorrow that I felt myself almost being swept away by it.

“Lady Merellis.”

“What?”

“I can’t forgive you. You’re so strong, but you were unable to protect her.”

I promised myself I wouldn’t turn my eyes away from her, so I met her gaze. What she said was true, after all. I had to face it head-on.

“Aren’t you angry?” she asked through tears. I didn’t understand the question, so I just stared at her. “She... Anna wanted to be like you. She wanted to fight with you. I know that she was prepared to die for you if she had to. Maybe even saying this degrades her identity as a fighter...”

I thought back fondly on that journey we had taken together, back when Enarene and Anna had first become my attendants. They had lamented their powerlessness when we fought those bandits. Afterward, they worked tirelessly to train themselves up. I understood what Enarene was saying. When you hold a sword in your hand, you had to prepare yourself for death.

Taking someone else’s life or having someone else take your own was not something to be considered lightly. And yet I worried about her too much. Perhaps she thought I wasn’t taking that resolve seriously enough.

“What you say is true. I wasn’t able to protect Anna. That was an affront to her. She stood on that battlefield herself as a full-fledged warrior. I should’ve been able to take those I couldn’t protect away from the battle.”

And I knew that. But still... “But that’s how important she is to you, right? You don’t have to forgive me. Don’t forgive me for not being able to protect her. Don’t forgive me because I took her to the battlefield in the first place. Watch over me instead, so that one day, I can become the kind of person strong enough to protect her.”

Tears overflowed from Enarene’s eyes. She must have been holding them in that whole time, I was certain of it. “I’m... I’m sorry!” She collapsed, sobbing, continuing to apologize to me.

I reached out to Enarene and took her into my arms. I wept with her, comforted by her warmth.

The next day, I returned to the Armelia manor. Even though I hadn’t been gone for that long, it felt oddly nostalgic. The imposing white building was bright and beautiful before me.

“Merry!” The moment I walked inside, my beloved fiancé opened his arms wide and embraced me. I clung onto him, not caring who was watching us.



“Louis!” He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tight. We stayed like that for some time. His warmth and smell were the same as I remembered, and it filled me with relief. I wasn’t sure how long we embraced there like that, but eventually, he let go of me and guided me down the hallway.

He led me to the parlor. We sat on the sofa, pressed up close to each other.

“You came back to me.”

“Yes... Thank you, Louis. It’s all because of you. Because those supplies came so quickly, we were able to wait and ambush the enemy. That’s the only reason we were able to stop them.”

“I’m glad I was able to help.”

I leaned against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “And...I’m sorry. I couldn’t protect someone who was precious to you.” I clung onto his shirt.

“I heard... Yes, I heard. And I just want you to know that it’s not your fault. That was what Berne chose.”

“Berne?” I looked up at him, not recognizing that name. *Oh, wait...*

“His real name. Only Father, Alf, and I knew it, but now...”

His real name was Berne... I finally learned it, and I vowed I would never forget it. Instead, I etched his name onto my heart.

“Louis... We can’t make his funeral public, can we?”

“That’s right. Only Father, Alf, and I will attend. Since he was a spy, it can’t be public.”

“Will he be buried with the Armelia family?”

“He will. He probably should be buried with the soldiers, but since it won’t be public, we decided that is where he should be laid to rest, especially when we consider our other spies.”

Berne’s upbringing, and the other spies like him, was shrouded in secrecy. There might be more opportunities for women in espionage as well, such as for Enarene. Since women were technically forbidden from joining the army, it wouldn’t be possible to bury them along with the soldiers. As a result, Berne,

and all others like him in the future, would be buried with the Armelia family from now on. And Anna's name would be engraved next to his.

"Please, let me come to the funeral. I want to talk about Berne and Anna, to remember them."

"All right."

We made plans to attend their services together.

Time continued to pass, and everything started getting back to normal, but things had definitely changed. Nana, who had been recuperating back in the march, ultimately passed away. I was in Rimmel fighting at the time, so I wasn't able to be there for her. I felt so guilty and torn up about it that I took time off school to go back to the march and visit her grave.

So many tragic things happened during that time, and I had taken so much time off school as a result that it was a wonder I even passed my tests that term. But after I did pass them, I immediately made plans to go to Madame Caluis's and celebrated with my guardsmen who fought with me that day, just as we said we would. Louis came with me.

"Everyone! As promised, we've got the place all to ourselves tonight, so you can be as wild as you want to be!" I said in the most cheerful voice I could muster.

"Yeah! Let's drink!!!" They all followed suit. But to be honest, most of our time there was spent reminiscing about the comrades we'd lost.

"This is how they wanted to remember them," I whispered to Louis. "They're pretending to be cheerful while they share memories, so their comrades can rest in peace."

"I see..."

Although we were whispering back and forth, we were sitting very closely to each other.

The ladies teased us because of it.

"I can't believe you brought a man here, Mer!"

“She’s grown so beautiful... If you make Mer cry, you’ll pay for it!”

Louis looked flustered, which was quite unusual for him. He didn’t know quite how to respond to their lighthearted jabs.

“I can’t believe he’s taking her away from us...” one of the girls said.

“Hey, I think he’s taking her away from *us*!” A guard lamented.

As everyone bantered back and forth, it began to feel like old times again.

“The girls love me like a little sister, that’s all. I’m sure they know there’s no one manlier than all of you!”

“Should you really be saying that in front of your future husband?” Madame flashed me a mischievous grin.

“I’m sorry, but my future husband is definitely the manliest!” I shot back.

“However, I couldn’t ask for better comrades. You’re the only ones I could fight with on the battlefield completely confident that you have my back.”

Everyone smiled warmly at me, and we all returned to our reminiscing.

After Louis and I said farewell to the party, we went back to the Armelia manor. I was the only one living at the Anderson manor in the capital at the moment. My father and my brother were busy cleaning up the aftermath of the incident with Wels, so they couldn’t leave the march yet. There were plenty of servants at the manor, but it was too lonely for me to be at home with none of my family there. Louis sensed that and invited me to live with the Armelias for a while.

“Thanks for coming with me today. And for letting me stay at your house.”

“I wanted to. Don’t worry about it.”

I hadn’t been able to sleep so I went to the library, and there, I ran into Louis. The two of us then decided to go to the parlor together and chat for a while.

“You have some really great allies.” I knew exactly who he was talking about.

“Yes, I do. They haven’t changed the way they treat me even after finding out who I really am. I did ask them to do that, but still.”

“The reason they listened is because they’re good people. You gained their trust.” Louis reached out and touched my cheek. “Feeling sleepy yet?”

“Yes. I’m feeling a little better now too.”

Honestly, I hadn’t been able to get much rest lately.

“I thought work had calmed down for you. But you’re still up late?” I asked.

It seemed Louis wasn’t sleeping much either. There were dark circles under his eyes.

“Yes. The same goes for Father. He’s drowning in his regrets, ever since Mother passed.”

I didn’t know at the time, but Lady Aurelia had been unwell since before I went to Rimmel, and she had since passed away. Her funeral was just the other day. Many people came to mourn her, which proved just how much she was adored by everyone. Lord Romello was deeply depressed, saying he was focusing too much on his work and wasn’t able to help her. Father had a long talk with him, Lord Romello returned to work after Lady Aurelia’s funeral.

I wondered what they talked about. Perhaps they shared a special bond now that they were both widowers. At any rate, it filled me with relief to see Lord Romello smiling again, even if it was just for show, because at first, he was beside himself with grief. Louis had been extremely depressed as well. I could hardly bear to see them like that.

As for myself, I was utterly shocked when Lady Aurelia died. She was like a mother to me. I was already deep in my grief over the deaths of Anna, Abel, my guardsmen, and Nana, so for Lady Aurelia to die on top of that was just too much. That was the real reason why I hadn’t been able to sleep at night.

Louis was so concerned about me that it was part of the reason why he insisted I come stay with him.

“Tonight, I realized that I shouldn’t just sit around and ruminate on my regrets. I should remember Mother and talk about her with a smile,” he said.

“Yes, I was thinking the same thing.”

We both began to talk about his mother. We laughed together as we

reminisced about the past.

“Are you going back to school tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’m planning to. I can’t go directly there from here, though, so I’ll go back to my house for a bit and then leave.”

“Do you need to get some things from there?” he asked.

“No, I have everything I need here.”

I just felt that it wasn’t proper to commute directly from the Armelia manor since we were not yet wed. It wouldn’t be a good idea to be seen staying here overnight.

“Just come in my carriage. It’s not that unusual for someone to pick up his fiancée for school, right?”

“I suppose that’s true. I’ll do that.” If anyone asked, we could just say that was the reason.

“Speaking of school, I heard Prince Edgar finally decided on a fiancée.”

“You’re right... She’s my best friend,” I replied.

While I was in Rimmel, Sharia got engaged to the prince. And not only that, but he chose Ellia to be his concubine.

“Father wasn’t happy with Prince Edgar’s sudden decision.”

“I know... If he had just consulted with Lord Romello, he could have come up with a plan to let him marry Sharia without taking Ellia on as his concubine.”

Prince Edgar’s actions came as a surprise to both me and the Armelias. While I was away, he had negotiated with other nobles and gotten permission to marry Sharia. However, their condition was that he had to take Ellia on as his mistress at the same time.

It was a very bad move. Ellia was the daughter of Marquis Marea. And even though Sharia was the daughter of a count, her father did not have as much influence as House Marea. Despite this, Sharia would be queen while Ellia was confined to being concubine. It was clear to me that the sparks of the power struggle had been lit.

But ultimately, what was done was done.

I couldn't do anything about the decision without causing an incident. And if something did occur, it would not only damage Sharia's honor but threaten the authority of the royal family.

My hands were sadly tied.

"Thinking about the future, Father could have avoided Prince Edgar's request. In a way, Prince Edgar's actions were the right decision for him."

"For *him*, yes." I let out a sigh. "Still, now that this has happened, I must do everything I can to support Sharia in the palace."

"That's a good idea. But for now, you should get to sleep. You have school tomorrow."

"True." I gave Louis a kiss and went back to my bedroom.

After that, many things happened. Louis and I got married, as did Sharia and Prince Edgar. Our weddings went smoothly, and things were going well. But for some reason, Queen Iria remained quite fond of me and occasionally invited me to tea parties. It was an advantage for me since I planned on becoming more active in high society, and I always gratefully accepted her invitations.

At the same time, I worked very hard to make sure that Sharia's life at the palace was comfortable.

Time just passed along like that, and many things began to change in little ways. Sometimes, I would think back on the past and mourn people whose lives had slipped through my fingers. I didn't think that pain would ever leave me, but I knew the reason I felt that pain was proof I was alive. And most of all, I wanted to carry on the wishes of the true heroes who had protected the kingdom from the shadows and lost their lives because of it.

I keep living, and I think of them.

I keep living, and I continue to fight alongside them.

But now, my battlefield is the world of high society.

Sometimes, I hold a sword in my hand so that no one else will be able to take those I love away from me again.

I keep living, and I fight alongside them so that everyone can live at peace in the kingdom. And I trust that someday, someone else will follow in my footsteps and take up the battle in my place.

Epilogue:

The Duchess's Daughter Takes Over

"I HAD NO IDEA all that happened in Rimmel, Mother."

I felt like my mother and I had been talking for a very long time. Even now, people speak of Grandpa Romello's successful non-aggression treaty between the Dukes Grindel, Crowe, and Philling of Rimmel. They say it was one of his greatest accomplishments. I had no idea there was such a layered backstory behind it.

If just one thing hadn't gone to plan, I might not have even been born—and I mean that seriously, not as a joke.

"Well, of course you didn't. It was never made public, and it can never come to light, for that matter. It's a story that will never be written down in history." Mother had a faint smile on her face as she said that. I could tell she still had lingering regrets about the past which she could never undo. "Have I become a person strong enough to protect them? Whenever I felt like running away, or whenever times were tough, I would ask myself that. Sometimes I still do, and I probably always will. I want to be the kind of person they're proud of. That's the only way I can honor those who sacrificed their lives."

That made sense to me. I had always looked at Mother and wondered how she could stay so calm, especially when I was young, and the name of House Armelia weighed so heavily on me.

But now, I realized that Mother always had a clear vision of what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be. That was why she never faltered.

"I feel like once again, I've learned just how important peace is," I said. "I've vowed to protect the citizens of the duchy and help them live peaceful lives. I promise you that I'll carry the battle on to the future and carry out their wishes."

Mother seemed to know what I meant. She smiled at me through her tears.

I couldn't easily say that I would shoulder the burden of all those sacrifices, all of those people's hopes and dreams. I already had to bear the responsibility for

the lives of my citizens, so I couldn't shoulder that as well. But what I *could* do was keep my vow, which was exactly what those who had lost their lives had prayed for. We all wanted the same thing.

"Hey, Iris? There's one thing I want to ask you."

"What is it, Mother?"

"What's your idea of peace?" she asked.

I paused for a moment, thinking, because it was very similar to the question, "*What kind of ruler would you like to be?*" And I thought of that question every day. I thought, and thought, and kept pondering it, even now.

"Well, this is very idealistic, but I want peace to be where everyone understands the value of their own lives...the value of living."

"The value of living?"

"Yes. People can't live without hopes. People can't live without food. War takes both of those things away from people. So, my idea of peace is for people to want to live...to build a world that values life over anything else. More specifically, I want to further develop the duchy so that everyone has dreams and can make a good living for their children. That's my idea of peace."

"I see. He he he. So you're not just thinking of peace in a militaristic sense, but even beyond that. You want to build and protect a peaceful world like that."

"Yes. I've already failed at stopping a war once, so perhaps that's why I want this so much."

Mother smiled happily at me.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. "Pardon me, Lady Iris, but your husband has arrived."

"Oh? Dean's here?" I was genuinely surprised to hear the servant's announcement because, after all, we were in the capital. Dean was my husband, but he was also the former (and presumed dead) Prince Alfred, so he generally never came here. It was partly because since both Dean and I were the ones to make decisions for the duchy, we wanted to avoid both of us being away at the same time.

However, the most important reason for it was so that no one would discover Dean's true identity. He wore a disguise whenever he visited the capital, but there was always the possibility that someone could recognize him. Anytime he came here, was taking a risk.

Meanwhile, everyone in Armelia simply knew him as Dean, so he was free to do as he pleased there.

"Excuse me, Lady Merellis, Iris," he said.

"Dean! You should've told me you were coming!"

"I had some business to take care of here, and Elpis wanted to come too."

"Goodness... Shouldn't you just be honest and say you missed Iris and wanted to see her?" Mother teased, making my cheeks flush.

"It seems I can't fool you, Lady Merellis. It's true, I've spent too long away from my beloved wife, and I couldn't bear it another minute," he admitted.

"Oh, Dean! Stop that!" My husband's words were quite effective on me, and I had to look away.

"Well, Iris. I'm sure you two have a lot of catching up to do. I don't want to intrude."

"But, Mother..." I was the one who asked her to tell me stories, so I felt bad about her leaving.

"It's all right. I told you everything you wanted to know," she said with a satisfied smile.

"All right, then. Thank you for spending time with me, Mother." She was trying to be considerate of me and I wanted to honor that, so Dean and I excused ourselves.

"What were you two talking about?" Dean asked in a casual tone. When we were in front of others, he would still talk to me formally from time to time, but mostly he was informal around me.

"Hm? She was telling me stories about when she was young."

"Oh, really?" His eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Stories about the young Lady

Merellis... That certainly sounds interesting. You know, I can research just about anyone, but I can't find a thing about your mother's past."

"You looked into her past?"

"When I was battling my brother for power, I researched all the main noble families. But you know, I couldn't find the first thing about when your mother was young. She rarely made appearances at social functions when she was a girl. I don't think any stories about her existed until right before she entered the academy. I thought it was odd, and I really put a lot of effort into digging deep to find something, but there was just...nothing."

"Interesting. Did you use the spy Tanya met before?" Tanya had told me there was a spy she made contact with named Milo, but we had never confirmed he worked for Dean. I asked also to test him a bit and see how he responded.

"Yes, but one of my other spies used to work at the Anderson manor. They wouldn't tell me a thing either." I was surprised that Dean just came out and admitted that, *and* the fact that the spy formerly worked for House Anderson. It certainly was a small world.

But what was most surprising to me was that at the time, Dean was the first prince of Tasmeria. This spy of his refused orders from royalty.

"That wasn't good, was it?" I asked.

"Of course not, but...I had already found out everything I really needed to about the various families' histories, and there was nothing particularly suspicious about it. I didn't press him further."

"Hm... What was this spy's name?" I had a feeling it was either Alf or Enarene. Alf would be very elderly by now though, so I doubted it was him. That left Enarene. There would have been any number of people in House Anderson capable of being a spy though, since they were all trained in martial arts, so it was difficult to say.

"Please don't ask me that. Even though I've left the royal family, I shouldn't be leaking that information."

"True."

I didn't want to make any trouble for Berne and Leticia.

"Still, I'm dying to know what she told you. Their devotion to Lady Merellis was so intense that they came all the way back to Armelia for the battle against Acacia."

"I'm sure you have a good idea already."

"I suppose I can imagine. But honestly, it's hard to believe." Dean held up his hands in surrender. "Please, my dear wife... Won't you tell me?"

"He he. I can't tell you right now," I answered with a laugh.

"But you can tell me later?"

"Yes. It's a long story, so once we're back at home, we can settle in, and I'll tell it to you."

"Got it. I can't wait," he said.

We arrived at another parlor where our son Elpis was sitting on the sofa.

"Goodness, Elpis! You've gotten so big!" I ran over to him and gave him a big hug.

"Mother! I'm not a little boy anymore, you know!" He looked slightly embarrassed. I adored my children so much that I thought it was so cute even when he blushed.

"Ha ha ha. I'm your mother! You'll always be my little boy!" I tousled his hair and scooted away from him slightly. The older Elpis got, the more he resembled Dean. Though, honestly, I hoped he wouldn't look *too* much like him. But, after all, no one from Elpis's generation knew what Prince Alfred had looked like, and if anyone ever did comment on it, we could just say he got his looks from his great-grandmother.

"Hm? Father and Brother are here!"

"Oh, are you done with training, Luce?"

"Yeah! I worked really hard today!"

There was a knock at the door, and Luce entered the room. Dean picked her up with a proud look on his face. "You've gotten bigger since I saw you last!"

“Ha ha ha!” Luce hugged Dean happily.

“That’s not fair, Dean. I wanted to hold Luce!”

“You had her all to yourself the whole time you were at the capital.”

“Oh... Fine! I’ll have Elpis all to myself then!” I hugged my son again. He seemed to have given up resisting because he let me.

“Father, will you spar with me soon? Lyle says you’re really strong!”

“I’m pretty rusty... You’ll honestly get more experience sparring with Lyle.”

“Really?!”

I smiled as I watched the two of them talk. Children really do grow up in the blink of an eye, so much so that you don’t even want to miss a moment of it. I wondered if I would be able to tell my children a story about Dean and I once they were older, like my mother had done for me. I was a little scared and a little excited for that moment to come as I imagined what it would be like.

After Iris left, Merellis was lost in her thoughts when suddenly a servant entered.

“Excuse me, Lady Merellis. General Gazell is here to see you.”

“Hi there, Merellis. It’s been a while!” A deep, jovial voice boomed throughout the room as Merellis’s father, Gazell, entered the room.

“Father! This place is just brimming with visitors today!”

“Hm? Oh, you mean Iris? Where is she, by the way?”

“Dean and Elpis came, so I’m sure they’re spending some family time together.”

“I see... It’s been so long since I’ve seen them.”

“He he. I don’t think they’re going home today, so there will be plenty of time for you to talk to them. *If* you have the time, that is.”

“I do! There aren’t many people who have as much time on their hands as I do.”

“When a military man has time on his hands, that means it’s a time of peace. That’s a good thing!”

“I agree.” Gazell plopped down in the seat in front of Merellis, where Iris had been sitting earlier.

“I told Iris everything. About my past.”

“Did you? Was she surprised?” For a moment, her father took his gaze off her. It seemed he was suppressing emotions rising within him, but she couldn’t read them on his face.

“She said she would carry on the fight. And that because she had vowed to protect the duchy, as long as she keeps that vow, that will carry on their wishes for the future.”

Gazell closed his eyes and quietly listened to his daughter speak.

“That’s what he wanted, right? When he said he would entrust it to me.”

“You only tell your final wishes to someone you know you can trust. I’m sure that’s what he meant,” Gazell said with a soft smile on his face.

“I hope so.”

“It is. Especially since Iris told you she’d carry on for you as well.”

“Indeed... I’m lucky to have such a wonderful daughter.”

A servant came in with some tea at the perfect moment. Gazell picked up his fresh cup and slowly sipped from it. “Speaking of the past... Did you tell her about Divan?”

“No. Unfortunately, Dean and Elpis came just before I could.”

“I see. I can’t wait to hear about Iris’s reaction when she hears about *that* one.”

“I’m sure she’ll be surprised that Divan was Nort’s son.”

Divan was a spy from Tweil who had manipulated Yuri. He was obsessed with destroying Houses Armelia and Anderson, so he used Yuri to try to accomplish his goals. And when she failed, he abandoned her.

“I was stunned when I met him on the battlefield.”

That had happened when Tweil broke the cease-fire and started marching troops toward Tasmeria. Gazell and Baron Messi worked with each other and Gazell led his troops through Messi's domain to prepare for the attack...and coincidentally ran into Divan. Everyone thought he had run away, but the man had been lying low in Messi's barony.

"Your instincts are uncanny, Father. You didn't have any information on him beforehand, right? To run into him, just like that...all I can say is that I expected nothing less from you."

"Complimenting me isn't going to get you anywhere, missy." Gazell laughed and then let out a sigh. "Still, his obsession was frightening. I suppose he was trying to avenge his father."

"Yes. Nort had the misfortune of being used by Cordis, and I was the one who killed him."

"You just put out the fire. The true villain was Cordis."

"And you killed that villain. Perhaps that's why," Merellis said with a frown.

"It was probably because we succeeded in thwarting the plot after the battle. Everywhere we searched back then led us to a hole, even within the Tasmerian army. I have to take my hat off to Alf's skill at rooting them all out," Gazell reasoned.

"Yes, but the fact that he was able to build such a plot in another country showed just how capable he was. Perhaps this sounds strange, but it must have been frustrating for him."

Gazell closed his eyes. He could still hear what Divan had said the moment before he had killed him. Divan had cursed at him.

"It's not because Father failed! It's all Duke Sligar's fault for hatching this plot to begin with! I...I just wanted to prove it! That's why I used Tweil from the very beginning! I wanted to bring victory to Rimmel! But you're going to interfere again, Gazell?!"

"I know it was frustrating. Because if not for you, and Pax...and for my husband, I might have become consumed by my hatred and enveloped in its flames. I could have dragged innocent people into my quest for revenge,

burning all who came into contact with me.”

“Isn’t that the difference between the two of you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Merellis, you had people around you who were concerned about you, including me. He didn’t. The only relationships he chose to have with others were with those he was using. No matter how great the flames of hatred inside of him grew, there was no one to extinguish them.”

Merellis smiled at her father’s words. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’m a very lucky person,” she murmured. She rose and walked over to the window, seeing a beautiful sunset stretched across the sky. “By the way, Father, aren’t you going back to the march soon?”

In truth, Merellis didn’t like the color red. It reminded her of being stained with crimson. That color had taken too many of her loved ones away. And it reminded her of all the lives she had taken.

But this was the path she had chosen, so she had no regrets.

Still...she would never come to like the color red.

“I’ll come with you. I want to visit Mother’s grave.”

The red sky reminded her of when she was young and played until she was too exhausted to play anymore. She would then look up at the sunset as she ran home to where her mother waited for her. It was a fond memory.

“Oh, is that right? Merelda will like that. Why don’t we invite Pax too, and we can all go there together?”

“That would be lovely.” Merellis looked back at her father and smiled. Inwardly, she thought she would never see the day when she would feel so at peace with the anniversary of her mother’s death looming before her. Especially not after she had forced herself to remember it all while telling Iris. “I’m a very lucky person,” she murmured.

“Hm? Did you say something?” Gazell asked.

“It’s nothing. I’m just looking forward to us being together as a family again.”

“Ah, I see.” Gazell smiled softly.

Luce burst into Iris’s room. “Mother!”

“Shh!” Dean quieted Luce, and the little girl quickly covered her mouth.

She was even trying to hold her breath; it was an adorable sight.

Dean’s eyes softened as he gazed upon her. “You can breathe, darling. Come over here, quietly.”

Luce tiptoed over to him and spotted her mother Iris serenely lying there across Dean’s lap.

“She must be tired. We were reminiscing about the past and she fell asleep.”

“Mother...is tired?”

“Yes, even your mother gets tired. She works very hard as the governor of Armelia, just as hard as you train. Plus, she’s a perfectionist, so she works *too* hard at times. And then she gets tired like this.”

“Mother’s working hard too?”

“That’s right. Everyone works hard to make their wishes come true. Even if it doesn’t look like it. And that’s especially true for talented people.”

Just then, Elpis came in. “Mother, excuse m—” He immediately went quiet when he saw what was going on.

“It’s all right. She’s fast asleep. Just don’t speak too loudly.”

“Pardon me for interrupting. Luce, let’s go.”

“But...”

“Mother is tired. Let’s let her rest.”

“Okay, you’re right.” Luce obeyed her brother and left the room. “Even Mother gets tired... I didn’t realize that.”



“Of course you didn’t. Mother never shows it, except in front of Father.”

“But why?”

“Because she carries a very heavy responsibility. And because that’s how much she loves Father,” explained Elpis.

“I don’t get it.”

“It just means Mother loves Father a lot!”

“Well I get *that*! But what about us?” asked Luce.

“Of course Mother loves us too. She loves us so much that’s why she doesn’t show when she’s tired.”

“I...really don’t get it after all.”

“That’s okay. You’ll understand someday.”

“Will I?” Luce frowned.

“Yes, you will.” Elpis lightly patted her head.

Luce’s eyes softened with happiness. “Will I understand tomorrow?” she asked.

A hesitant smile formed on Elpis’s face. “Probably not. You’ll understand once you get to be Mother’s age though.”

“I won’t understand until *that* long?”

“That’s right. And until then, you have to work really hard.”

“You mean like at training?”

“Hmm... Yes, but also at the etiquette lessons Mother takes you to.”

“Ugh, I’m bad at those!”

“It’s okay. No one’s great at it at first. But it’ll become more fun as you practice, and you’ll get better at it.”

“Is that how it was for you, Brother?”

“Yes, of course. With lots of things too. I just made sure nobody noticed I wasn’t good at it.”

“Oh, so I’m not the only one!” Luce smiled. “I’ll do my best!”

“That’s the spirit. Let’s go back to our room.”

“Okay!” Luce took Elpis’s hand. He chuckled a little bit and then squeezed her hand in return as the servants looked warmly upon the children.

Afterword

WE'VE ARRIVED at the final volume at last. I truly can't believe we were able to put out eight volumes! It's all thanks to my publishers and to everyone who has read these stories. Thank you so much. As I mentioned in the fifth volume's afterword, sometimes when I write, I'm frustrated with my lacking power of expression. All of the kind letters of support you've sent really helped me in those moments. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you once again.

Merellis's saga became a prequel of sorts for *Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter*. When I was writing Iris's story, I always made it clear that Merellis's character was both the perfect duchess and a very strong woman. Now you can see that her strength not only meant strength in combat but also strength of will.

Thomas Edison famously said, "Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." It means that if you don't have inspiration, it doesn't matter how hard you work. But it also means that if you don't work hard, inspiration means nothing.

Merellis was a very industrious person. She inherited her strength from her father and her beauty from her mother. Even so, she wasn't satisfied with what she had. She didn't go down the path everyone told her to; instead, she listened to her heart and, with a strong will, chose her own path. If something stood in her way, she cut through it. To Iris, her mother seemed larger than life.

By the way, in the main story of *Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter*, when Merellis and Iris met in the tower, she told her daughter that she once wanted to become a soldier, but after that, I never touched on her past. That was when I thought it would be nice to reveal her strength and have her be a woman of many talents.

It made sense not to expand on her backstory there since it was Iris's tale, but as a writer, I was so thrilled and grateful to have the opportunity to write about Merellis. It was very important for me to show how past events tied into the future, so there were some dark moments. However, those gave even more meaning to Iris's path. Conversely, since Merellis had such bitter experiences

yet still blazed her own way, she believed that children should choose their own futures despite what their parents say, and if they did, they would learn everything they needed. As a mother, she wanted to indulge her children, especially since they had been born into a time of peace. That was how both Iris and Berne were how they came to be in the first volume.

I really am full of gratitude that I was able to complete so many volumes of *Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter*. I wrote what I wanted to, and I had the great fortune of having you all read it. Nothing else could make me happier. Thank you so much!

—**REIA**



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